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ABSTRACT

Although there has been an explosion of information and advice about child rearing in the mass media, little attention has been given to the nature or extent of the media's impact on parents or to ways in which media could be used more effectively. Based on an analysis of books, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, film, videotapes, software, and the Internet, and interviews with over 200 key professionals in fields such as communication research, parent education, journalism, and public relations, this report identifies strengths and weaknesses in media coverage of parenting. The report first reviews historical and social forces that have produced the expanded media interest in parenting. Strengths in the media's role are then identified, including the following: (1) parenting is a staple topic in many print media; (2) parenting initiatives within electronic media are expanding; (3) parental demand for media information is substantial and increasing; and (4) media can have a significant impact. Identified weaknesses are then listed, including the following: (1) easily accessible sources of information for media on parenting are scarce and scattered; (2) media parenting advice is often confusing and conflicting; (3) parents of adolescents receive less information and support from media than parents of younger children; and (4) entertainment television has been overlooked as an influence on parenting and as a vehicle for supporting and informing parents. The report recommends that the knowledge base about parenting be strengthened by holding consensus-building conferences and that a comprehensive, integrated communications strategy be implemented to disseminate the emerging consensus about parenting in ongoing and targeted ways. Contains approximately 400 references. (KB)

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The Role of the Mass Media in Parenting Education

A. Rae Simpson, Ph.D.

July 1997

A project of the Center for Health Communication
Harvard School of Public Health

This project was supported by a grant from
The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

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About the Author

A. Rae Goodell Simpson, Ph.D., is founder and head of the parenting education program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a consultant to the Center for Health Communication at the Harvard School of Public Health. Author of *The Visible Scientists* (Little, Brown, 1977), she has written and lectured extensively for both professional and popular audiences on the role of the mass media in communicating science and health information to the public. She recently co-founded a professional organization called the National Parenting Education Network to advance the field of parenting education. Her doctorate is in communication research from Stanford University.

About the Center for Health Communication

The Center for Health Communication of the Harvard School of Public Health works closely with scholars in the behavioral sciences and with practitioners in advertising, marketing, and public relations to learn more about human behavior and how to influence it through mass communication. The Center's mission is to help develop, legitimize, and institutionalize an emerging field of endeavor in academic public health, namely mass communication and health. Jay A. Winsten, Ph.D., Associate Dean for Public and Community Affairs at the Harvard School of Public Health, is the Center's Director.

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Preface

The Center for Health Communication at the Harvard School of Public Health has as its mission to mobilize the immense power of mass communication to improve human health. Toward that end, the Center has engaged in a number of projects that apply state-of-the-art mass communication strategies to provide the public with reliable health information and motivate the public to engage in positive behavior change.

One of the Center's best known initiatives is the Designated Driver Campaign, which has promoted a social norm that "the driver does not drink," contributing to a 30 percent decline in annual drunk driving fatalities. The more recent "Squash It!" Campaign to Prevent Youth Violence promotes a social norm that says it is "cool" to walk away from potentially violent confrontations; it is currently being evaluated. A new initiative, the Harvard Mentoring Project, will use mass communication strategies to recruit volunteers to serve as mentors and tutors for at-risk youth.

With additional projects in such areas as teen substance abuse and children's fitness and nutrition, the Center has maintained a consistent interest in the health and well-being of children and adolescents. Therefore, when Rae Goodell Simpson approached the Center to propose that we consider a project on parenting, the concept sparked considerable interest. Parents play a powerful role in the lives of children and adolescents, yet the role of the media in motivating and informing parents seemed largely unexplored. The first step, however, was to examine the opportunities: what has been done so far, and what needs to be done next? Because these questions had rarely been asked, let alone answered, the Center undertook a project to inform not only its own work but also the field as a whole.

The result is the following report, made possible by the support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. It is our hope that this report will support the work of those currently engaged in reaching parents through the mass media, and that it will stimulate initiatives in new directions, toward the goal of tapping much more effectively the media's ability to support children, parents, and families.

Jay A. Winsten, Ph.D., Associate Dean and Center Director
Center for Health Communication
Harvard School of Public Health
July 1997

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Executive Summary

With the persistence of grave problems for children in this country, attention has focused increasingly on the critical importance of parents and parenting in children's lives. Reflecting and reinforcing this emphasis on parenting has been an explosion of information and advice about child-rearing in the mass media. Yet surprisingly little attention has been given to the nature or extent of the media's impact on parents, or to the ways in which the media's influence could be used more effectively.

This report, produced by the Harvard Center for Health Communication and funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, seeks to address this gap in our understanding about the role of the mass media in supporting and informing parents. Its goal is to pull together existing information, to offer some initial observations and recommendations, and to catalyze further reflection, research, and action.

Based on an analysis of a broad range of materials and over 200 interviews, the report identifies four significant strengths in media coverage of parenting, but also four serious weaknesses. Two major initiatives are therefore recommended, in order to capitalize on the media's strengths, address the weaknesses, and tap more effectively the considerable potential of the media to support current and future efforts on behalf of children, parents, and families.

Strengths in the Media's Role

In assessing the current state of media attention to parenting, several positive and promising developments emerge. Of these developments, the following four are particularly noteworthy:

- **Parenting has become a staple among topics in many print media.**

  Parenting books, magazines, and regional controlled-circulation papers, as well as child and family beat reporters at major newspapers, have increased dramatically. Almost every parent is exposed to printed information about parenting, many repeatedly.

- **Parenting initiatives within the electronic media are expanding.**

  In particular, rapid growth is occurring in public television, cable television, local news, and the internet, and new developments are occurring on the commercial networks as well.

- **The demand for media information among parents is substantial and increasing.**

  By a number of measures, many parents have a high level of interest in information about child-rearing, including information from the mass media, on a

broad range of topics. The extent to which particular parents are reached, however, varies according to a number of important factors, including age, gender, communication skills and style, cultural and language preferences, and economic resources.

- **The preponderance of professional opinion, supported by theory and research, is that the media, as part of a complex set of factors, can and do have a significant impact on parents and parenting.**

  Although little direct research has been done on the effects of the media on parents, inferences can be drawn from theory, related research, and professional experience. Together, they make a strong case that the media have important influences, in conjunction with other forces and strategies, on parents' attitudes and behaviors, and hence on child outcomes.

Weaknesses in the Media's Role

On the other hand, a number of drawbacks seriously undermine the ability of the media to contribute effectively to the well-being of parents and families. Of these drawbacks, four are especially important:

- **Easily accessible sources of information for the media on parenting topics are scarce and scattered.**

  Contributing in particular to the inaccessibility of information is the fact that researchers and resources related to parenting are embedded in hundreds of organizations and dozens of disciplines, with no centralized access to information.

- **Parenting advice conveyed by the media is often confusing and conflicting.**

  Caught in the interaction of economic, intellectual, cultural, and social forces, the only constant in child-rearing advice has been change. Amid this fluctuation and controversy, researchers, practitioners, the media, policy makers, advocates, and parents have all been frustrated in their efforts to seek reliable information from each other.

- **Parents of adolescents receive less information and support from the media than parents of younger children.**

  This relative inattention to the parenting of adolescents occurs in spite of the fact that adolescents have unique and critical developmental needs, and that failure to meet those needs creates serious risks for adolescents, families, and society. Parents play a critical role in influencing outcomes for teenagers, but they often lack the information and support to do so effectively. Exacerbating the problem are negative images of teenagers in the news and entertainment media, and misleading cultural messages suggesting that parents are not important in the teen years.

- **Entertainment television has been largely overlooked as a source of influence on parenting and as a vehicle for supporting and informing parents.**

  What little is known about parenting messages in entertainment programming is mixed, both reassuring and troubling, and attempts to influence them largely untried.

Recommendations

These weaknesses, while significant, are also windows of opportunity for making significant progress in strengthening the role of the media in supporting parents. At the heart of the problem are weaknesses in the knowledge base and its accessibility, and a series of concrete steps can be taken to address these weaknesses in cost-effective ways.

The steps involve, first, consolidating findings and building consensus within the field, and second, ensuring that the emerging consensus is disseminated in careful, extensive, and effective ways. Two key initiatives are therefore recommended:

- **Strengthen the knowledge base about parenting, in particular by holding consensus-building conferences.**

  It is widely agreed that the time has come to bring together professionals from a broad range of disciplinary and cultural perspectives in order to consolidate, integrate, and analyze both research and practical knowledge about parenting. It would be important for both researchers and practitioners to be represented in the discussions, as well as the media, policy makers, advocates, and parents themselves.

  A key purpose of these meetings would be to identify the areas of agreement that exist within the diversity of cultures and approaches that make up current parenting research and practice in this country. Widespread (albeit never universal) agreement is possible in several areas, according to a number of leading researchers and practitioners.

  Significant commonalities would be expected to emerge, for example, with respect to some of the central goals that parents and society hold for children and child-rearing, with respect to some of the key roles that children need parents to play in order to meet these goals, and with respect to some of the key resources that parents need from society, as well as the most effective ways to provide them. More diversity, although still some important consensus, would be expected with respect to specific parental strategies for meeting children's needs. The degree of consensus that has been achieved in recent initiatives,

such as in the information on early brain development prepared for the "I Am Your Child" Campaign, illustrates the potential for this kind of process.

Thus, the meetings would take unprecedented steps to clarify the areas of agreement, disagreement, and uncertainty with respect to existing knowledge about parenting. The implications of doing so would be profound for empowering the media, parents, and all those who work with and for parents and families.

- **Implement a comprehensive, integrated communications strategy to disseminate the emerging consensus about parenting in ongoing and targeted ways.**

  Information emerging from clarification and consensus about the importance of parenting and of particular parenting practices will only be as effective as its dissemination. A carefully planned and executed communications strategy is needed to ensure that, as it emerges, the information reaches parents, media, advocates, policy makers, and professionals who work with parents, such as parenting educators, health care providers, early childhood educators, teachers, and mental health providers. A number of characteristics would be important to the success of the strategy, including its coordination with the consensus-building conferences and with the many existing initiatives that target parents and families.

  Within the strategy, special attention also needs to be paid to the areas where there are gaps in current media efforts. This can be accomplished by designing and implementing special initiatives to target parents who are not effectively reached by current media efforts, including parents of adolescents; to engage media that are not being effectively utilized, especially entertainment media; and to create a permanent resource center to make information accessible to the media and others in an ongoing way.

  In other words, this report recommends that significant attention be given to the coherence and the accessibility of the knowledge base about parenting, as well as to a few major gaps in the media's attention to parenting.

  The stage is set to take media initiatives in parenting education to a higher level, one that enhances significantly the media's ability to support and inform parents, and to reinforce and extend existing efforts on behalf of today's parents, children, and families.

Introduction

The twentieth century has seen a surge of professional and popular interest in parenting education and also a surge in technological and economic growth in the mass media within the United States. Not surprisingly, these two trends have converged to generate an explosion of information about parenting in the mass media.

In nearly every category of mass media, from books and magazines to television and the internet, messages are being directed to parents to an unprecedented degree. Yet little attention has been given to the quantity or quality of those messages, or to their impact on parents or parenting. Similarly, little attention has been given to the opportunities offered by the media to have greater and more positive impact on parents and on the growing parenting education movement at a time when, by all accounts, such support is badly needed.

This report, produced by the Harvard Center for Health Communication and funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, seeks to address this gap in our understanding about the role of the mass media in parenting education. Its goal is to pull together existing information, to offer some initial observations, and to catalyze further research, reflection, discussion, consensus, and action.

Toward that end, the Harvard Center for Health Communication conducted a project to gather data about the role of the mass media in parenting education from a variety of sources, including research studies, press reports, and media project samples and descriptions. Also, over 200 interviews were conducted with key professionals in such fields as media policy, historical research, communication research, health care, funding administration, health promotion, parent education, child advocacy, journalism, publishing, broadcasting, media economics, anthropology, sociology, advertising, and public relations. A group of eight leaders served as expert advisors, and a number of other interviewees offered substantial information and advice; they are listed, with our gratitude, in the Acknowledgments section.

The scope of the project was defined to include media activities for which parents and others in parenting roles were specifically designated as a target audience. Initiatives were considered that address specific parenting groups, such as teen parents, and specific parenting issues, such as media literacy, but particular attention was given to initiatives that address parenting attitudes, knowledge, and skills more generally. Parenting of children of all ages was considered, from the prenatal period through young adulthood. No attempt, however, was made to identify all of the media projects that fell within this scope; rather, the project sought to identify the major developments and trends—to

map the overall terrain. Thus, the particular media projects cited in this report are intended to be illustrative, not exhaustive.

Also, projects were not included for which the primary audience was children. Thus, the issues associated with children's media, such as the impact of violence and adult themes, were not a primary focus, except as they relate to parent-child interactions. It is acknowledged, however, that parents are in fact an important audience for children's media, as monitors and mediators of their children's experience, as the ultimate target of much of the advertising and many of the messages in children's media, and as the family members most likely to experience and influence the interactions created by media effects on children's behavior. It is further acknowledged that some children's programs, such as *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, offer powerful models for healthy caregiving behavior, and that parents sometimes report watching them for this very purpose (Fenichel 1997; Rogers 1995).

The report also recognizes that the media serve not only as sources of information but also as a dominant form of leisure activity among children and families. Although this phenomenon was, again, not a focus of this project, the report acknowledges that the media exert significant influences simply by virtue of the quantity of their daily consumption by children and parents, alone and together, and by their presence as "background noise" in family life (Hobbs 1997; see also Dorr and Rabin 1995; Van Evra 1990; Meyrowitz 1985).

The particular media that were considered in this project included books, magazines and newsletters, newspapers, radio, television, film, videotapes, software, and the internet. While technically some are media (such as radio and newspapers) and some are materials typically distributed by media (such as videos) (see Manoff 1985), they were considered together and defined as "mass media" according to common practice. Commercial advertising and its impact were not included.

"Parents" were defined, for the purposes of this report, to encompass all those adults with responsibility for raising children, including immediate and extended family members or kin, step-parents, guardians, foster parents, and tribe and clan members (National Parenting Education Network 1997; Wilson 1997; Carter 1996). Where the term "parents" appears in this report, it is shorthand for all of these groups and for all others in parenting roles. Professional caregivers are not specifically included in the definition, but their importance is acknowledged, as is the overlap between professional caregivers and parents as an audience; thus, much of the report's discussion is relevant to the issues of professional caregivers as well.

The growing movement to provide information and support to parents is referred to as "parenting education" rather than "parent education," because the term "parenting," while a controversial gerund, embraces all those who engage in child-rearing activities. The term "education" remains unfortunate in that it suggests to some people that the goal is to inculcate parents with specific knowledge. However, this report and the vast majority of current "parenting education" initiatives take the view that informational needs can and must ultimately be determined by each parent, based on his or her existing knowledge, strengths, skills, learning style, values, goals, and assessment of the family's needs, as well as temperamental, developmental, and other characteristics of both parent and child. Parenting "education" includes the provision of support as well as information, and the relative proportions of each depend on a variety of factors.

Furthermore, this report takes the view that parenting education is best thought of as one in a set of strategies that assess and address the overall social, economic, and informational needs of families. The messianic quality of earlier parenting education efforts, in other words, has been replaced for the most part by a healthy respect for the role of parents, of diversity, and of the broad context of social and economic services in which parenting education plays a part. Consistent with that view, this report assumes that both the growing parenting education movement and the mass media have significant roles to play, as part of a constellation of services, in meeting the needs of parents and children.

This report also assumes that there is no one "right" way to raise children. The rich diversity of approaches to parenting, arising from a diversity of cultures, values, goals, backgrounds, and styles, is to be affirmed and honored. There is much common ground among these approaches, however, arising from widely shared goals for our children, regarding, for example, physical health, social relationships, education, and economic self-sufficiency. The diversity contributes to our vitality as a nation, the common ground to our cohesion. Both are embraced in the best elements of the parenting education movement, and both can and should be incorporated in mass media initiatives related to parenting.

This report further assumes, with the preponderance of professional evidence and opinion, that parents play a powerful ongoing role in influencing the healthy development of their children, and that parenting is a complex and challenging task, one that demands a broad range of skills and ways of thinking. Adults, like children, go through developmental changes, and parenting is one of the adult roles most likely, given its complexity and intensity, to stimulate these developmental changes and to benefit from them (see for example Holden 1997; Belenky 1996; Kegan 1994; Steinberg 1994; Galinsky 1987; Newberger 1980). Thus, all parents can benefit from both information and support.

At the same time, this report assumes that, while media and media messages influence parents, parents in turn influence the media, and both influence and are influenced by a number of other factors, such as research findings, prevailing assumptions and values within the research and professional communities, economic conditions, technological developments in the media, prevailing assumptions and demographics within the media community, and social and political institutions within the larger society. Multidimensional interactions among researchers, media gatekeepers, media staff, advertisers, parent audiences, social and political opinion makers, and other groups create a context for media messages that can be described, as a participant at a recent conference on science and the media put it, as a "complex, noisy, messy, people-dependent unstable web" (Center for Health Communication 1996).

Finally, the question is often raised about the extent to which emphasis in media efforts should be on changing individual attitudes and behavior, such as through social marketing media campaigns, rather than on changing the social and economic conditions in which they occur, such as through media advocacy campaigns (Dombro et al. 1996; Wallack et al. 1993). Within the web of interactions that shape the well-being of children, one approach emphasizes the potential influences of the media on parents, that is, shaping parents' behavior toward their children, while the other emphasizes the potential influences of parents on the media, that is, empowering parents and their advocates to shape the media's influence on the institutions that affect families. This report takes the view that the answer is not "either-or" but "both-and." Both approaches are important, although not in the spirit of blaming parents for problems engendered by a lack of social and economic supports, but rather of supporting parents in accomplishing their goals both through community activism and individual growth. In short, the complex web should be strengthened across a number of its dimensions.

The report is organized into four main sections:

Background

A review of the historical and social forces that have produced the explosion of interest in parenting in the media

Strengths in the Media's Role

An assessment of the strengths in current media efforts related to parenting

Weaknesses in the Media's Role

An analysis of some of the key gaps in the state of the art of communicating parenting information via the mass media

Recommendations

Suggestions for further developments in research and practice that could significantly enhance the effectiveness of the media in supporting parents, children, and families

In addition, a database and resource files were created in conjunction with the project. Further information on the topics covered in this report can therefore be requested by contacting the author at the address on the inside back cover.

Background

The Need

Children in the United States have been called "our most disadvantaged minority" (*Time* 1990). Like all disadvantaged minorities, not all of its members are disadvantaged, but the numbers are alarming and disproportionate. For example, one out of four young children lives below the poverty line (National Center 1996). Nearly 1 million cases of child abuse are confirmed each year, and about 1000 children die as a result of abuse (Daro and Wang 1997). Young adolescents face additional risks including suicide, substance abuse, violent crime, and dropping out of school (Carnegie Council 1995, 1992).

Given such striking statistics, many leaders consider the welfare of children and adolescents to be a crisis, one that must be addressed both for children's own sake and for the future of American society (Carnegie Council 1995; Carnegie Task Force 1994). In response to these concerns, children's issues have taken a high position on the national political and social agenda, triggering a number of approaches both to preventing and to treating the problems of children and youth.

A large and influential set of these approaches focuses on the American family as a key to the well-being of children and ultimately of American society. Politically and philosophically diverse, the leaders and organizations focusing on the family vary in whether they see the problems stemming primarily from a breakdown in traditional family structure and values, weaknesses in parent-child relationships and parental responsibility, or lack of proper economic and social supports for families (see Hinds 1996).

Although these approaches compete for resources and power, they share a common interest in educating and supporting parents, acknowledging that, whatever changes need to be made in families, one of the most critical agents of change ultimately will be parents and others in parenting roles, broadly defined. Parents, then, become the target of a vast array of messages and organizational efforts, dealing with such areas as teaching children values, protecting children from negative media influences, preventing teen pregnancy, involving parents in children's education, advocating for special needs and health care, strengthening the role of fathers, preventing child abuse, balancing work and family, maintaining cultural traditions, preventing substance abuse, understanding child development, and instilling self-esteem.

The Parenting Education Movement

For some organizations and leaders, support and education for parents has become the central focus of their efforts on behalf of children and families, reviving, expanding, and building on a parenting education movement that has been part of American social history intermittently since the country's origins.

Nick Carter, author of a recent study of American parenting education for the Pew Charitable Trusts, has estimated that more than 50,000 parenting programs are reaching millions of parents and caregivers every day (Carter 1995; see also Carter 1996). In a 1996 survey by the Commonwealth Fund, over one-third of parents of young children had attended a class or discussion about raising children or parenting, ranging from 25 percent of those with less than a high school education to 45 percent of college graduates (Young, Davis, and Schoen 1996). "Interest in parenting," Carter concluded, "is sweeping this country like a tidal wave" (Carter 1995).

Programs and projects that offer information and support to parents are as diverse as the parents whom they serve and the professionals and parents who create them. They are diverse in services, populations served, settings, budgets, priorities, staff training, sponsorship, and governance. They include clinical support groups for abusive parents, advocacy organizations promoting media literacy, religious classes in marriage preparation, home visiting programs for parents of newborns, programs to strengthen particular racial and ethnic families and traditions, workplace parenting seminars, hospital classes in childbirth preparation and newborn care, nursing mothers' groups, day care outreach programs, school curriculum segments on caring and family, pediatric services in health education, parent-child activities, child care resource and referral centers, support groups in battered women's shelters, court-based classes for divorcing parents, self-help groups, and many more.

Professionals and paraprofessionals involved come from such fields as pediatrics, nursing, family medicine, psychology, social work, child advocacy, early childhood education, adult education, religion, family policy, and corporate consulting. Some programs target exclusively parents and those in parenting roles, while others address parents as part of a larger audience such as all caregivers or all employees with family responsibilities. Some target families "at risk," some address primarily basic needs, and others take the approach that all parents need support and information to handle the complex task of raising children well. In part because of the diversity of approaches and disciplines, these programs also vary profoundly in content, and in the theoretical, research, and applied knowledge on which content is based.

The current revival of parent education in the United States builds on efforts to support and educate parents that have waxed and waned since Colonial times. In the late seventeenth century, backed by strong governmental and church interest in supervising parents' moral education of the young, "tithingmen" conducted home visits (Schlossman 1976). In the nineteenth century, meetings of mothers' groups became common, fostering discussion of child development and child-rearing problems (Sunley 1955). In the early 1900s, federal initiatives

began to appear; in 1914, for example, the Children's Bureau began publishing *Infant Care* pamphlets (Young 1990). In the 1920s, several forces boosted the level of activity in parenting education, including major funding from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial for child development research and its promulgation to parents; the adoption by the American Home Economics Association of a broader homemaking curriculum that included parent education; and an emphasis on nursery-school education (Schlossman 1983, 1976; Croake and Glover 1977; Senn 1975). The gradually increasing stature of scientific approaches to child study, among other factors, contributed to the gradually increasing role of child-rearing advice from outside the family (Bigner 1994). "Parent education," remarks Steven Schlossman, a Carnegie Mellon University historian, "had come of age" (Schlossman 1976, p. 455).

The current wave of interest in parent education and family support is often dated to federal social program initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Head Start, and to the profound social changes that triggered them (Kagan 1995; Coontz 1992). Expansion has since been fueled by the continued influence of psychological and social sciences (Herman 1995), the growth of research on child development, the increasing cultural diversity of the American population, the continued success of the childbirth education movement, the interests of conservative Christian groups and other religious traditions (Greven 1990), changes in the economy and in health care systems, demographic changes such as increased rates of divorce and of women in the work force, the persistence of social problems such as drug abuse and violence, and the efforts of philanthropic and advocacy organizations to combat them.

Since the 1970s, the growing family resource movement, which promotes the development of resources and support for families, has in some ways paralleled, in some ways reflected, and in some ways encompassed parts of the parenting education movement (Kagan and Weissbourd 1994). In a shift away from the early intervention emphasis in the 1960s and 1970s, more is heard now about the need for education and support for all parents, the importance of providing opportunities for all parents to develop in their role, and a goal of "a family or parenting center in every community."

The Mass Media's Role

As with most social movements, the media have both stimulated and reflected the periods of growth in parenting education, responding and contributing to changing economics, demographics, technology, available information, and political and cultural frameworks. Writings offering advice on parenting date back to the ancient Greeks; in Europe, child instruction manuals were written as early as the fourteenth century (deMause 1988; Schlossman 1983). Child-

rearing manuals were imported from England in colonial times (Walzer 1988), and, by the early nineteenth century, original American articles on parenting were appearing in the new "woman's magazines" (Studenski 1985). Books and periodicals were in abundance by the mid-1800s, reinforced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the creation of parenting organizations that published books and magazines, such as the National Congress of Mothers, which became the National PTA (Schlossman 1983; Croake and Glover 1977; Sunley 1955).

Among the child development projects of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial in the 1920s was funding for the launch of *Parents' Magazine* in 1926 by entrepreneur George Hecht, with the involvement of Teachers College at Columbia University (Schlossman 1986, 1983, 1976). Gradually evolving with the growth of magazines was also the emergence of the concept of professional experts who, in response to the demand from parents and media for more answers than the research could deliver, offered advice also on the basis of their experience and expertise as pediatricians, mental health providers, and teachers (Sears, Maccoby, and Levin 1957).

More recently, media activity has paralleled the growth in parenting education that dates from the 1960s. In the 1960s and 1970s, the number of books on parenting mushroomed, increasing not only in number but in percentage of the book market. In the 1970s and 1980s, magazines on parenting also increased dramatically in number and variety. The late 1970s saw the emergence of regional parenting publications, now numbering over 100 and covering most major metropolitan areas in the country. In the early 1990s, child and family beat reporters were added at a number of leading daily newspapers, and children's issues were given more emphasis in news coverage. In fall 1996, public television launched two new parenting series, and at least two others are currently in preparation. In commercial and public broadcasting, children's issues including parenting have competed successfully for a presence among the myriad of topics in news, talk shows, news magazines, and documentaries. Several cable television channels are carrying parenting series, and newer technologies, such as videos and the internet, are also vying for parents' dollars and attention. These trends and others are described in more detail below.

Driving much of the growth in the commercial sector, of course, is the fact that parents are "advertiser-friendly." That is, they are relatively heavy consumers of commercial products, spending $4500 to $12,000 a year per child, depending on their income and the child's age. With the birth of 4 million babies each year, they also make lasting choices on new consumer products (Lino 1996; Kerwin 1995). Parents today spend twice as much per year in

goods and services for children as their parents did, although this change is in part the result of increased expenses for paid child care (Cutler 1990).

Other factors contributing to the growth in media activity related to parenting include changes in technology—allowing media to target more specialized audience niches, for example, in cable television. Also important are changing demographics of the media themselves, such that more women and more "babyboomers" are making gatekeeping and story decisions. Broad changes in the political and social context of media activities, reflected, for example, in the attention to family issues in the 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns, also affect media content and stimulate noncommercial media efforts on behalf of parents and children.

The question then becomes, what role is all of this activity playing in parenting and the parenting education movement? How could it play a larger or more effective role? This report will look first at the strengths in current media coverage of parenting, then the weaknesses, leading to a set of recommendations.

Strengths in the Media's Role

Within the media's rich history of conveying parenting information, a number of positive and promising developments stand out. The media's attention to parenting has been extensive in the print media and expanding in the electronic media. Unprecedented numbers of parents have been exposed to parenting content, and the potential exists, given new technology and media interest, for even greater reach. The nature and extent of these positive developments are discussed as follows:

Parenting has become a staple among topics in many print media.

Media technologies are sometimes described as progressing through stages of development (Davison, Boylan, and Yu 1976). In this framework, books and magazines, having a longer developmental history, are further along in identifying the audience and advertising markets for parenting information and in matching these demands with technological and economic realities.

Parenting books increased steadily in quantity and percentage of the market from the 1960s to the early 1990s, as parents shifted from reading perhaps one parenting "manual" to seeking out a variety of books and materials in bookstores and libraries (Carlson and Crase 1983; Clarke-Stewart 1978). Today, at least 1500 books on parenting topics are in print at any one time, with at least 100 new titles added each year (Ervin 1996; Boccella 1995a; Owens 1994). Sales were over 11 million in 1994, roughly 1.1 percent of the total market and 20 percent of the "psychology" market, according to the American Booksellers Association (1996).

With the increased quantity has also come increased diversity of topics, such as divorce, premature birth, African American parenting, special needs, family recreation, and media literacy. There has been a dramatic increase in books on fathering, according to Wade Horn, Director of the National Fatherhood Initiative (Horn 1997). Also driving a portion of the market has been a parallel growth of Christian publishing, for which parenting topics are a central focus, and increased interest in themes involving values, character, and responsibility (Farkas and Johnson 1997; Brainerd 1996; Boccella 1995a; Scott 1995). More parenting books are also being published in Spanish (Mahoney 1995).

Similarly, parenting magazines have been expanding in numbers and circulation. The *National Directory of Magazines* lists over 200 magazines in its category, "Family," and dozens of publications in other related categories, such as "Children," "Education," and "Health" (*National Directory of Magazines* 1996). Vicky Lansky also compiles a list annually of over 250 "parent-directed publications" (Lansky 1996a).

Paid-circulation magazines on parenting jumped in the 1970s and 1980s from a few steady sellers, notably *Parents* (formerly *Parents'*), to a handful of general parenting magazines, including *Parenting* and *Child*, targeting in particular the "babyboomers" who were tending to have children at older ages, at higher levels of education, and at higher incomes (Pfaff 1987). Advertising is strong for these magazines, according to analysts with Hall's Magazine Report and with the Magazine Publishers of America (Jorgensen 1996; MacDonald 1996), and these magazines, like parenting books, are considered a staple of media parenting education.

There are also indications, based on data from Hall's Magazine Reports, that, in the past five years, the percentage of editorial space devoted to child-rearing has been increasing in women's magazines such as *Family Circle, Good Housekeeping, Ladies' Home Journal, McCall's, Redbook*, and *Woman's Day*. Some parenting information also emerges in the mix of topics in news magazines and in policy-oriented magazines; in its 1994 report on children and family journalism, the Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families cited notable contributions to coverage of children's issues in *The New Republic, Mother Jones, Life*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*, as well as *U.S. News & World Report, Time*, and *Newsweek* (Casey Journalism Center 1994).

As with books, there has also been a proliferation of magazines on more specialized parenting topics. The 1970s and 1980s saw the appearance of *Twins, Mothering, Working Mother*, and *Exceptional Parent* (for parents of children with disabilities), as well as a number of others. The 1990s have been characterized by increased experimentation with even more specialized audiences, including many not typically represented in the pages of the larger, more mainstream publications (Culbreth 1996; Lansky 1996b). For example, still in an experimental phase, with varying degrees of economic backing and security, are such titles as *Modern Dad, Successful Black Parenting*, and *hipMama* (an alternative magazine for young mothers). Magazines published by nonprofit organizations also continue to play a key role, such as *Adoptive Families* from Adoptive Families of America, *Our Children* from the National PTA, and *Child Health Talk* from the National Black Child Development Institute.

Newsletters on parenting, child development, and related topics are also produced by hundreds of nonprofit, private, and governmental organizations that address child abuse prevention, fathering, adoption, giftedness, special needs, media literacy, and many other topics, as well as for-profit companies providing child care services, corporate work/family services, consumer products, and others. Reflecting a trend in all parenting publications toward age-specific content, newsletters include a number that focus on particular ages, such as *Parent and Preschooler* (ages one to six) and *Parenting Insights* (ages seven to

fourteen). The newsletter *Dialogue*, published by the Institute for Mental Health Initiatives in Washington, D.C., often covers parenting topics and is directed to media professionals themselves, especially entertainment media.

Furthermore, hundreds of organizations—nonprofit and for-profit, government and private, local and national—publish thousands of pamphlets and brochures on topics in child health and parenting, of which the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the United States Department of Education are just a few examples (see Children's Trust Fund 1997).

Also important are developments with respect to controlled-circulation magazines, supported by advertising and circulated to expectant and new parents by request or by distribution in childbirth classes, hospital gift packs, doctors' offices and clinics, diaper services, and retail stores. Circulation figures in the millions are reported for some of these publications, such as *American Baby* and *Child Birth*. Similarly, a special edition of *ParentSource*, published by TMSI, Inc., in Newton, Massachusetts, for McDonald's Restaurants, goes to about 1 million heavy users of McDonald's called "McMoms."

Among newspapers, the most significant development is the emergence in the early 1990s of a "child and family" beat, which generally includes not only child welfare but also, in smaller percentages, parenting topics. In a 1993 study by the Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families, over half of sixty-two major newspapers and news services had recently added child and family reporters (Casey Journalism Center 1994), although growth has flattened since then (Trost 1997; Smith 1996). The establishment of the Casey Center itself reflects the trend, as does the creation of the Prudential Fellowship for Children and the News, a nine-month program at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism for journalists seeking to strengthen their coverage of children's issues and for experts on children's issues seeking to strengthen their journalism training.

An average of 4.6 "child-related" stories were carried daily in major newspapers in 1993, according to a study for Children Now (Kunkel 1996, 1994). Of these stories, about 13 percent contained "information of practical use to parents" (Kunkel 1994, p. 10). Additional news stories can be presumed to have strong implications for parents; for example, news coverage of the death of seven-year-old airplane pilot Jessica Dubroff, whose plane crashed in Colorado while she was attempting to become the youngest pilot to fly coast-to-coast, included extensive debate over whether her parents' support constituted pressure, abuse, or appropriate guidance (Adams and Armstrong 1996; Stengel

1996; Verhovek 1996; Ybarra 1996). Also common in newspapers are columns on parenting; most simply offer the writer's opinions, but a few, such as those of Barbara Meltz of *The Boston Globe*, report on research developments and trends in the field.

Increases in parenting coverage in newspapers are attributed to such factors as pressure to attract female readers, new recognition of the civic importance of children's issues, increased involvement of male journalists in covering children's issues (thus easing reporters' concerns that the beat is a "girl ghetto"), the roles of President and Mrs. Clinton in keeping family issues on the political agenda, a trend toward the reorganization and "re-engineering" of newsrooms, and the increase in gatekeepers who are themselves babyboomers having children. Child and family reporters caution, however, that it is still difficult to get on the front page, to be taken seriously, and to incorporate implications for families in larger policy stories (Meltz 1997; Stepp 1997; Casey Journalism Center 1994; Trost 1994).

Finally, the phenomenon of regional parenting publications emerged in the late 1970s and has grown from a cottage industry to a major business (Lansky 1996b). Largely controlled-circulation "giveaways," these publications can be found in virtually every large city, from *Seattle's Child* to *The Boston Parents' Paper*, and they have a combined circulation of 4.8 million, according to Kathy Mittler, Executive Director of Parenting Publications of America. A handful of these publications are directed to parents of specific ethnic groups, such as Orlando-based *Black Family Today*, and there has been discussion of publishing Spanish language papers (Mittler 1996).

Given the circulation figures of books, magazines, and newspapers, it can be presumed that almost every parent is exposed to some printed parenting information, although certain demographic groups are harder to reach with for-profit print media. *American Baby* alone reaches close to 90 percent of the 4 million mothers who give birth each year (Ingram 1996). Studies suggest that over 90 percent of parents read at least one parenting book, purchased or borrowed from the library, and fully a quarter read five or more (Koepke and Williams 1989; Clarke-Stewart 1978). About half of all parents read newspapers daily (Yankelovich MONITOR 1995).

Parenting initiatives within the electronic media are expanding.

By and large, radio, television, video, and computer technologies are not as fully developed as print media with respect to conveying parenting information. While coverage of child and family issues is consistent on radio and television news and news magazines, beat reporters are less common than in

daily newspapers, with notable exceptions (Trost 1997). On commercial radio and television, and even on public radio and television, regular parenting programs have been relatively rare. At least four cable channels have been proposed that would carry parenting content exclusively, but only two are still in development—Parenthood Television and Parent Television—and none has been launched. Parenting videos, while numbering in the hundreds, have not found a steady market (Hance 1996; Kuperschmid 1996; Peterson 1996), although some analysts remain hopeful that this will change (Jaffe 1997; Hance 1996; Shore 1994). Software products on parenting topics, including CDs, are much fewer in number, and their future uncertain, although a small market may ultimately emerge (Sanders 1997; Morrow 1996).

Amid the fluctuations, however, parenting has found a presence in a number of electronic media arenas. On commercial radio, parenting topics arise on talk shows at the initiative of callers, hosts, and advocacy organizations (Aufderheide and Chester 1990). The three-hour *Dr. Laura Schlessinger Show*, carried daily on about 350 U.S. stations and heard by about 15 million listeners, addresses parenting issues about half of the time (Bellows 1997), with a conservative approach emphasizing family values (Johnson 1996). The three-hour *Working Mom on the Run*, carried weekends on about 300 stations, offers rapid-fire banter with simple, underlying messages, many of which relate to parenting. Shorter formats can also be found, such as sixty- and ninety-second segments called "In the Learning Center," hosted by child psychologist and author Lonnie Carton, carried on CBS Network stations. Local radio parenting programs are numerous, according to radio consultant Valerie Geller (1996b); for example, an interactive talk show is currently hosted by author Lawrence Kutner at ABC station KGO in San Francisco (Kutner 1997).

Because radio is a pervasive medium, reaching 76 percent of adults every day and 95 percent every week (Radio Advertising Bureau 1997), experimentation with radio parenting programs is likely to continue. Although overall growth in parenting programs has not been significant, according to *Radio Ink* family specialist Shawn Deena (1996), parenting programs on Christian radio stations are thriving: James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* half-hour radio programs, as well as a variety of shorter and longer formats, are broadcast to 1 to 2 million listeners a day over many of the 1400 Christian radio stations in the United States, which also carry hundreds of other local and national parenting programs (Grossland 1996; Gustavson 1996; National Religious Broadcasters 1996).

In December 1995, National Public Radio created a "Workplace and Family" beat, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, with reporter David Molpus covering dozens of stories on such topics as "Childcare Problems Become Apparent in Bad Weather" and "Companies Find Worker Loyalty Pays Off in

the Long Run," airing on *Morning Edition, Weekend Edition*, and *All Things Considered* (National Public Radio 1996). Locally produced, short-term and ongoing programs are numerous on public radio, such as a fall 1996 five-week series on WHYY-FM in Philadelphia, "Raising a Thinking Child," hosted by researcher and author Myrna Shure. One national interview show, *The Parent's Journal*, airs weekly for one hour on about 130 stations, hosted by the show's creator, Bobbi Conner (1996).

On public television, parenting programming is undergoing unprecedented experimentation. Two parenting series were broadcast in fall 1996, "Spilled Milk" from Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and "Parenting Works" from American Program Service. At least two additional series are in development, designed to parallel two new children's school-readiness series: the first is *Kids and How to Grow Them*, a thirteen-part weekly series from WGBH, Boston, with a parallel radio call-in show, to accompany a children's literacy program *Between the Lions*, and the second is *Show and Tell Me*, from Children's Television Workshop, with parallel between-program spots, to accompany the children's program *Dragon Tales*. Formats for these new programs include studio discussion with parents, field segments showing interactions in the parents' homes, expert guests, and short tips. A "Parenting and Family Programming Resource List," compiled by the KQED Center for Education and Lifelong Learning at public television station KQED in San Francisco, lists thirty-eight series and specials that have aired on public television since 1990, including *Dr. T. Berry Brazelton—Touchpoints, Childhood, Listening to Children: A Moral Journey with Robert Coles*, and *Frontline* topics such as "The Vanishing Father" (KQED n.d.). With respect to news programming, a search of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) database, provided to the project by PBS, turned up child development and child care themes in the last several years on *The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour, Washington Week in Review, To the Contrary, Frontline*, and a number of other programs (Public Broadcasting 1996).

On commercial broadcast television, parenting series have been rare, but news and news magazines have become a significant source of information regarding parenting. In a 1993 study for Children Now, national news broadcasts carried an average of 1.3 "child-related" stories, about 21 percent of which had information "of practical use to parents" (Kunkel 1994, p. 10). *NBC Nightly News*, for example, currently runs "The Family" segments, which have recently included segments on the importance of the father's role in early childhood (February 10, 1997), the proposed Family Friendly Workplace Act (February 28, 1997), and the importance of early stimulation for healthy brain development (March 3, 1997). News magazines also frequently cover topics related to parenting; in a 1993 study conducted at Stanford University, about

12 percent of the segments on three news magazines related to children's issues (Frank 1994). In September 1996, ABC's *20/20*, for example, aired segments on sibling rivalry, with tips for how to reduce it, and on the prevalence of television viewing in families, with tips on limiting it; on April 13, 1997, *20/20* rebroadcast an hour-long compilation of correspondent John Stossel's parenting stories.

On local news, the Broadcast Image Group's president, Larry Rickel, estimates that there is at least one parenting segment each week in the top fifty markets, and he expects the numbers to increase as local news moves into earlier parts of the day, where audience demographics include more women of childbearing age (Rickel 1996). For example, WBNS in Columbus, Ohio, with a newscast from 5:00 to 6:00 pm daily, includes tips for parents as a regular feature. In the last four years, the trend has been toward more investigative reports, covering children's issues that affect parents, including "watch or die" stories such as hidden camera reports on the dangers of day care (Rickel 1996; Somers 1996). Also available are syndicated series of short parenting inserts for local news, including "Chris Evert's Parenting Points" and "News for Families."

Commercial television efforts to reach parents have also included talk shows and occasional large television "specials." Half of the talk shows in a 1994 content analysis conducted at Michigan State University had included "parent-child relations" as a major issue (Greenberg et al. 1995). Addressing the question of the quality of information offered, the Michigan State University study found that about half of parents disclosed embarrassing information about someone else, presumably including their children. However, a Stanford University study found that about half of talk shows on "child-related issues" contained information "of practical use to parents," a significantly higher percentage than for other formats (Frank 1994). With about sixteen to twenty-five talk shows airing nationally at any one time, and many more locally, the trend is for parenting themes to be topics of talk shows more frequently in the last few years, according to Jeanne Albronda Heaton, co-author of *Tuning in Trouble* (Heaton 1996; Heaton and Wilson 1995).

Oprah Winfrey, whose talk show reaches 20 million viewers a day, covers parenting issues frequently and uses her own history to illustrate the impact of child abuse (Jacobs 1997). Winfrey has also hosted television specials including "Scared Silent," which was broadcast on three networks and PBS in September 1992, documenting the prevalence and costly results of child abuse, and "About Us: The Dignity of Children," which was broadcast on ABC on March 29, 1997, portraying the unique needs and feelings of children.

Jeffrey Jacobs, president of Harpo, Inc., in Chicago, a division of which produces *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, is also founder of the CIVITAS Initiative, which gathers, evaluates, and distills findings from research and practice related to child development and maltreatment and applies the results to community development projects, while also conducting communications outreach, including a multimedia archive of child development information. Bruce Perry, Thomas S. Trammell Research Professor at Baylor College of Medicine, is Senior Fellow (Jacobs 1997).

On April 28, 1997, ABC aired "I Am Your Child," a one-hour prime-time special on the importance of early childhood development. Hosted by Tom Hanks, the program mixed documentary from New Screen Concepts with music and comedy by major celebrities such as Billy Crystal and Robin Williams, attracting a viewership of 9 million. The program, produced by Rob Reiner and others, was accompanied by extensive publicity, outreach, and written fulfillment materials as part of a campaign, chaired by Reiner, to raise public awareness about the importance of the first three years of life, to promote family involvement in young children's healthy development, and to mobilize communities on behalf of young children and families. Outreach for the "I Am Your Child" Campaign is based at the Families and Work Institute in New York, headed by Ellen Galinsky, and funded by more than a dozen major foundations and corporations. The campaign is organized on four levels: national media, public policy, national organizations, and state and local coalitions. On the national media front, the campaign has included special features on other ABC programs, including a five-part series on *Good Morning America*, a five-part series on *Today*, wrap-around footage for local affiliates, a *Newsweek* special edition (*Newsweek* 1997), public service announcements, a video for parents, a CD-ROM, and a web site (www.Iamyourchild.org). A White House conference, Early Childhood Development and Learning, was timed to coincide with the launch of the campaign on April 17, 1997. There is also a public policy agenda, and the campaign to date includes work with 128 national organizations and coalitions in all fifty states. The campaign has generated significant news coverage of children's brain development and the importance of the first three years of life (see for example Blakeslee 1997; Fleming 1997; Lindsay and Weaver 1997; Nash 1997), and further media projects on early childhood development are under consideration.

For commercial television, some of the major family-related developments have been not in parenting programming but rather in the related arena of protecting children from television portrayals of sex and violence (see for example Mediascope 1996). Developments have included introduction of devices such as the "V chip" that block out shows on a given television set, a rating system,

and discussion of reintroducing a "family hour" from 8:00 to 9:00 pm on prime time, with shows that contain little sex and violence (Mangan 1996; Mitchard 1996). In a related trend, responding to criticisms about violence in local news broadcasts ("if it bleeds it leads"), a number of stations, beginning in 1994 with WCCO-TV in Minneapolis, launched "family-sensitive newscasts" in which violent footage was edited out, victims of crime were handled sensitively, and crimes were put into a context that included solutions (Somers 1996; LaFayette 1995; Gunther 1994).

On cable television, which currently reaches about two-thirds of the 96 million television households (National Cable Television Association 1997), the concept of "niche programming" has spurred persistent attention to parent audiences (see for example *New York Times* 1996). A steady stream of parenting series has followed the success of T. Berry Brazelton's *What Every Baby Knows* on Lifetime. Examples include *American Baby* and *Healthy Kids* on the Family Channel, based on the controlled-circulation magazines by the same titles; *Kids These Days* on Lifetime, featuring David Elkind, Professor of Child Development at Tufts University; and *Parenting Today* on CNN, featuring a news magazine format; as well as a few home improvement shows that have parenting segments. *Your Baby and Child*, with British psychologist Penelope Leach, aired on Lifetime from December 1991 through May 1996. The Newborn Channel, supported by advertising, continues to be shown in maternity wards in over 300 hospitals in six-hour segments, repeated twenty-four hours a day, reaching about 1 million of the 4 million new birth parents annually.

Local cable access (see Nicholson 1990) has also generated parenting programs, such as "Interactive Parenting," a twelve-part series at WLRN in Miami, Florida, hosted by Nova Southeastern University professor Sally Goldberg. Anticipated are more local channels, with potential for local parenting shows and links between cable and web sites (Katz 1996). The future for full parenting cable channels, however, remains unclear, in part because of competition for funding and distribution by cable operators (Grossman 1997; Brown 1996; Boccella 1995b). The Family Channel, owned by International Family Entertainment, of which Pat Robertson is board chair, dropped preaching programs in 1995 largely in favor of reruns of successful family entertainment shows that reflect and teach Christian principles (Calian 1995).

Television, as well as radio and print media, has a long history of running campaigns, including public service announcements (PSAs) and special programming, that address topics related to children's health and well-being. For example, NBC's "The More You Know" campaign, now in its eighth year, features network stars delivering PSA messages on a variety of issues including parenting, child advocacy, and education, in partnership with a number of

social service organizations. ABC's "Children First" campaign, launched in 1994 in partnership with the Coalition for America's Children, includes local campaigns by about 150 ABC stations, or about 80 percent of ABC's affiliate base. CBS's "Class of 2000" campaign, launched in September 1996, focuses on the 1996–97 freshman high school class as a springboard for addressing problems and solutions for America's teenagers, including through PSAs, national and local news programming, specials, and events.

In 1995, the Advertising Council announced a ten-year initiative called "Commitment 2000: Raising a Better Tomorrow," in which the majority (now 80 percent) of its campaigns would be devoted to issues benefiting the health and well-being of children, with parents as one key target audience. A cornerstone of the Advertising Council initiative is a multi-media campaign, "Whose Side Are You On?," also involving the Benton Foundation and the Coalition for America's Children, to increase action on behalf of children. Other organizations whose campaigns sometimes target parents include those of the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, in conjunction with the Advertising Council, and those of the Partnership for a Drug-Free America (see Dombro et al. 1996).

Parenting videos, while their commercial future is uncertain, have not been dismissed as a potentially significant means of reaching parents. "Videotapes hold great promise for parenting education," according to a 1994 Carnegie Corporation report, "since four out of five American homes have a VCR and high-speed tape duplication has made it economically feasible to think of videotapes as giveaways" (Shore 1994, p. 23). "The environment is there," says Karen Jaffe, executive director of Kidsnet, a nonprofit clearinghouse on children's television, radio, audio, and video programming in Washington, D.C. (Jaffe 1997).

Over 750 video titles on "child care and parenting" are listed in Bowker's *Complete Video Directory* (Bowker 1996). Major sources of videos include television programming such as Brazelton's *What Every Baby Knows*; small, independent producers such as Vida Health Communications in Cambridge, Massachusetts; producers of parenting curricula such as Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) and Family Development Resources (the Nurturing Program); and nonprofit and for-profit organizations such as the Center for the Improvement of Child Caring and KIDSRIGHTS. With duplication costs declining, one area that is considered promising is the use of video as a means of advocacy by nonprofit organizations, such as for direct-mail video appeals (see Payne 1990/1991).

The expertise of the entertainment industry is also being applied more extensively to informational programming for parents, raising possibilities for creating more compelling videos. For example, video can be used powerfully to teach parents more empathy for their child, by depicting the world from a "kids' eye" point of view, showing how frightening, complex, surrealistic, and intense the world can look to a small child, and how large and powerful the adults can seem. This technique was used extensively in the recent Oprah Winfrey special, "About Us: The Dignity of Children," and it has been incorporated into the proposal of WGBH in Boston for its "Kids and How to Grow Them" parenting series (Mayer 1997). Similarly, Barry Zuckerman, professor and chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at Boston Medical Center, is developing a film in which infant behavior will be depicted in slow motion to show professionals who work with children the complex ways in which infants communicate with adults by means of their behavior (Zuckerman 1997).

A list of fifty-two recommended videos for parents and professionals on early childhood development, selected from over 400 videos received in response to a broad search, has been compiled for the "I Am Your Child" Campaign by Kidsnet, and a report, currently in preparation, will be available from the Commonwealth Fund in New York. The Children's Trust Fund of Massachusetts has compiled a list of thirty-eight parenting videos, as well as over 120 parenting education curricula, many of which include videos (Children's Trust Fund 1997). Selective lists, focusing largely on children's videos, are also available from advocacy groups such as the Coalition for Quality Children's Media and Parents' Choice.

Although software for children has been a significant market, software directed to parents has not. A 1996 search of software products for this project yielded about twelve titles, including three programs that provided health care information, one for creating a family tree, one on financial management, and one for planning baby's first year. Directed to a different market, "Baby Game" is designed to help teenagers understand the responsibilities and cost of parenting; it features a simulation of a "difficult one-month-old infant." A new CD-ROM from *Parenting* magazine, "Your Pregnancy, Your Newborn," has an interactive mix including short how-to videos, advice, parent testimony, referrals, and promotionally based shopping lists. However, the industry's perception is that the market is primarily for children's software, which, in some cases, involves parents in the activities. A new trend, according to some observers, is an increase in software for very young children (Gregor 1996), such as "BabyRom: Your Child's First Software," for ages six months to four years.

Finally, since 1994, parenting sites have been mushrooming on the internet. Categories include commercial sites that accept advertising such as ParentSoup

(www.parentsoup.com) and ParentsPlace (www.parentsplace.com), a few of which are beginning to charge a membership fee, such as Disney's Family.Com (www.family.com); special family forums within the major commercial on-line services such as America Online and Compuserve; and sites created by non-profit organizations such as the WonderWise Parent site (www.ksu.edu/wwparent/wondhome.htm) produced by Charles A. Smith, professor and extension specialist at Kansas State University, and the National Parent Information Network (ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/npin/npinhome.html) produced by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. Many of the major parenting sites have been launched by or linked to parenting print media; for example, the Family Education Network (www.familyeducation.com) was launched by the publisher of *Education Today* and has partnerships with *Education Week* and other print media.

Services are also springing up to help parents, like other audiences, cope with the confusion generated by the sheer quantity of internet sites and options, as well as the variation in quality. Printed reference guides are plentiful, as are guides located on the internet itself, including that of the National Parent Information Network. *FamilyPC* magazine prints frequent articles rating sites and describing new developments (see for example Griffith 1996). The Center for Media Education in Washington, D.C., is compiling a catalogue of the non-commercial sites for children and families.

Collectively, and sometimes within a single site, internet sites offer services for parents including reference information such as resource guides on camps or colleges, subject-indexed articles and excerpts on problems from toilet training to home schooling, catalogues and shopping, reviews of products or media such as books or baby foods, opportunities to ask questions of experts, bulletin boards for e-mail exchange of ideas, and chat rooms for "real time" exchange of ideas on many topics of interest to parents. Typically, larger sites offer a package of parenting advice and family and children's activities, thus appealing also to the perceived demand for more ideas for family recreation.

Currently about 19 percent of households that have children ages two to seventeen have access to the internet, with incomes typically in the $60,000 to $80,000 range (Jupiter Communications 1997; Bray 1996; Nielsen Media Research 1996, 1995; Owens 1996). However, Jupiter Communications, which tracks the children's internet market, projects that the number of families with internet access will almost triple by 2002, to 55 percent, and average household income of these families will drop somewhat to about $57,000 (Jupiter Communications 1997). Efforts to extend internet access to less affluent parents and families (average income in the United States is about half that

of internet users) include legislative measures to increase access in schools, libraries, housing projects, and other locations; manufacturing and technological developments to lower costs; and initiatives such as the New Parents Network in Tucson, Arizona, which provides touch-screen "kiosks" for easy access to information about resources for families, and the Family Education Network, which is building and linking community networks in individual school districts across the country to encourage family involvement in education.

The rapid expansion in internet parenting resources is spurred in part by the revolutionary growth of the internet itself and in part by changing demographics of internet use, including increased use by women, now estimated at around 30 percent, as well as increased access to the internet in schools (Ulsch 1996; Nielsen Media Research 1995; Turkle 1995). However, the viability and accessibility of the internet as a resource for parents remains unclear, particularly as sites move to generate revenue via advertising, merchandising, and subscription fees (Manly 1996). A commercial on-line service launched in spring 1996 by Compuserve, called "WOW!," featuring entirely family-oriented content, was discontinued after failing to attract enough subscribers (Owens 1997). Nonetheless, most projections call for continued growth in access and use of the internet, and growth in the segment of the market that includes women and families (Miller 1997).

The demand for media information among parents is substantial and increasing.

Industry analysts from many segments of the media—cable television, television news, magazines, the internet, newspaper features—share a common perception that parents want more information about parenting, including from the media, and that it is becoming increasingly acceptable for parents to seek out information (Heaton 1996; Murphy 1996; Rickel 1996; Somers 1996).

Research generally confirms significant levels of interest in more parenting information, across socioeconomic categories. A survey by the Commonwealth Fund found that 79 percent of parents of young children would like more information in at least one major area of parenting (Young, Davis, and Schoen 1996; see also Koepke and Williams 1989). The report of a recent survey by the nonprofit organization Zero to Three concluded that ". . . parents seem thirsty for information and advice to help them understand and respond to their child . . . . [P]arents seem well aware of the general importance of the love and time they give their infants and toddlers, but want more information about exactly *how* to influence their children in positive ways" (Zero to Three 1997a, pp. iii, 20). The interest stems in part, according to some surveys, from a perception by parents that they are not prepared for parenthood, or that they need to improve as parents (for recent examples see Zero to Three 1997a; Young, Davis, and Schoen 1996).

Audience surveys for local news stations find that interest in topics related to family ranks higher than sports or entertainment, although lower than crime or weather, according to Tom Somers, research project director for Audience Research & Development (Somers 1996). A survey for the Newspaper Association of America found that 46 percent of regular readers and 53 percent of occasional readers of newspapers wanted more stories "focusing on young people" (Smith 1996).

Also striking is a tendency for parents to seek information on a wide variety of topics (Sontag and Schacht 1994; Hughes and Durio 1983). Age-specific information on child development is at or near the top of the list, along with discipline, child health and safety, and education. Solving problems also is in high demand, including problems such as whining, refusing to eat, sibling fighting, defiance, "talking back," not doing chores, thumbsucking, lying, financial problems, difficulty sleeping, undesirable friends, too much television viewing, day care adjustment, developmental delays, colic, nightmares, fears, and school or day care misbehavior. Some topics, such as child development and setting limits, have widespread appeal, while others vary according to the circumstances of the parent: special needs parents, for instance, look for information on how to find and advocate for services, and single parents look for more information on fostering independence in children (Sontag and Schacht 1994; Hughes and Durio 1983).

How to teach and guide children is another important area, including teaching about drugs, careers, sex, safety from sexual molestation, racism, taking responsibility, divorce, spirituality, and values (Sontag and Schacht 1994; Koepke and Williams 1989; Carlson and Crase 1983; Hughes and Durio 1983; Clarke-Stewart 1978). In the Commonwealth Fund's recent survey, more than half of parents of young children wanted more information about encouraging their child to learn (Young, Davis, and Schoen 1996).

Experts also note at least two drawbacks to parents' current high demand for information. First, T. Berry Brazelton, best-selling author and professor of pediatrics, emeritus, at Harvard Medical School, observes that parents are sometimes so starved for information that they seek it indiscriminately, and media provide it without regard to whether its impact may be to undermine rather than strengthen child-rearing (Brazelton 1997). Second, as a general rule, parents, like most audiences, take little interest in political issues that do not affect them directly (Bales 1997), although they do pay attention to issues that do affect them directly, such as gun control, flexible work policies, and tax breaks (National Parenting Association 1996), as well as local schools and quality of education (Miller 1997).

Furthermore, not all parents share an equal "one size fits all" interest in the mass media. The extent to which media are used as sources for parenting information varies by gender; age of parents; age of children; whether children are biological, extended family, or adopted; income; family structure; educational level; employment status; and race and ethnicity (Zero to Three 1997a; Culbreth 1996; Young, Davis, and Schoen 1996; Parenting Publications 1993; Koepke and Williams 1989; Young 1988; Vukelich and Kliman 1985; Hughes and Durio 1983).

In other words, certain populations are disproportionately missing from mainstream media audiences, including: (1) teenagers who are parents; (2) fathers; (3) parents who are fluent in languages other than English; (4) parents whose communication skills and preferences are different from those, such as reading, that are emphasized by the mainstream media; (5) parents who do not seek information; (6) parents who do not experience the media or media experts as a desirable or credible source of information; and (7) parents who do not identify with mainstream American culture. Exacerbating matters for some populations, the level of writing in mainstream publications has been rising, in response to higher consumer levels of health consciousness, education, involvement in the work force, and media exposure in general (Kaplan 1996; MacDonald 1996; Princz 1996; Studenski 1985).

Promising examples of efforts to tailor media initiatives to the needs and preferences of harder-to-reach populations include: (1) age-paced, monthly newsletters with modest reading levels, such as those distributed to isolated rural parents through the Department of Agriculture's Cooperative Extension Service in Wisconsin and other states (Riley 1992; Riley et al. 1991); (2) community mobilization efforts by African American urban radio stations, close to half of which recently reported conducting initiatives on topics related to parenting, and more than three-quarters on topics related to education (Johnson and Birk 1993a,b; Johnson 1992); (3) use of local talk radio (Aufderheide and Chester 1990); (4) Spanish language materials and programming; (5) development of telephone "warmlines"; (6) parenting programs based in a greater diversity of settings such as churches and day care centers; (7) parenting programs that affirm and assist parents in making informed decisions about selecting and evaluating expert advice; and (8) several media campaigns targeted to harder-to-reach parents, such as a Spanish-language PSA campaign, sponsored by El Valor of Chicago in conjunction with the Advertising Council, which encourages parents to be their child's "first teacher" by reading, playing, and talking with their young children. The "I Am Your Child" Campaign, described earlier, is being adapted by the American Public Welfare Association for parents on or moving off of public assistance (Galinsky 1997).

Adding to the challenge in reaching parents is the fact that parents do not demonstrate a consistent interest in parenting advice over time. According to recent research, they are more likely to do so, for example, shortly before they need the information (hence the emphasis on age-related advice), when they are in the early stages of developing their ideas (hence the emphasis on advice for new parents), and when seeking advice does not expose them to negative judgments by others (Goodnow 1995). This research is also consistent with findings for adult education in general (see for example Vella 1994; Cross 1981).

Clearly, too, not all of parents' interest in parenting advice is directed to the mass media. Interpersonal sources, such as family, friends, physicians, and clergy, are sought out for advice, typically more extensively than the media (Zero to Three 1997a; Young, Davis, and Schoen 1996; Shetler, Winsor, and Ebata 1995; Young 1988).

Increasingly, however, research studies find that the media, particularly print media, are rivaling and even surpassing these interpersonal contacts as parenting resources, again depending on a number of demographic and cultural factors (Parenting Publications 1993; Riley et al. 1991; Koepke and Williams 1989; Carlson and Crase 1983; Hughes and Durio 1983; Clarke-Stewart 1978). In the Commonwealth Fund's recent survey, 74 percent of parents of young children had used books, magazines, television shows, or videos to get information about how to raise their children, ranging from 59 percent for those with less than a high school education to 85 percent for college graduates, with similar ranges for low to high incomes (Young, Davis, and Schoen 1996). In a recent survey for the organization Zero to Three, nearly half of all parents of children from birth to age three said that they pay a great deal or quite a bit of attention to newspaper articles and news reports about issues related to child development; 36 percent look for information in magazines, and 39 percent pick up literature in their pediatrician's office on a very or fairly regular basis (Zero to Three 1997a).

Reasons that have been offered for parents' increasing reliance on the media include being more pressed for time, more geographically distant from extended family, more concerned about traditional family values, more accustomed to a wide variety of media, more exposed to advertising for media parenting information, increasingly diverse in cultural background, accustomed to the ideas of popular psychology and the self-help movement, and deterred by the high cost or managed-care limitations associated with professional consultations.

The preponderance of professional opinion, supported by theory and research, is that the media, as part of a complex set of factors, can and do have a significant impact on parents and parenting.

Ultimately, all of the reach and potential reach of the media with respect to parents are meaningless if media messages do not influence parents and hence child outcomes. The impact of the media on parents has been the subject of relatively little direct research in contrast, for example, to the impact of the media on children. However, research in related areas suggests that the media, in the context of a number of other factors, do have a significant influence on parents and parenting. This finding is also supported by current theory and by professional experience.

One source of evidence for media effects on parents is the body of knowledge regarding media effects on audiences in general, of which parents are a part. The preponderance of professional opinion and research finds that the mass media have a number of effects on audiences (Backer 1997; Califano 1997; Rothman 1997; Dearing and Rogers 1996; Dombro et al. 1996; Backer 1995a,b; Maibach and Parrott 1995; Wallack et al. 1993; Backer, Rogers, and Sopory 1992; Flagg 1990). Most theoretical perspectives also posit significant media influences on audiences, including social learning theory, the uses and gratification approach, social cognitive theories, cultivation theory, and cultural studies or critical theory (see for example Dorr and Rabin 1995).

With respect to changes in individuals, these effects have been described as having seven levels: exposure to messages, awareness of messages, being informed by a message, being persuaded by a message, expressing intent to change behavior, changing behavior, and maintaining a change in behavior (Backer, Rogers, and Sopory 1992). With respect to changes in public opinion, stages have similarly been proposed: people begin to become aware of an issue, people develop a sense of urgency, people look for alternatives for dealing with the issue, people resist facing the costs and trade-offs necessary, people weigh the choices, people accept change intellectually, and people make a responsible judgment morally and emotionally (Yankelovich 1992; see also Dombro et al. 1996). These effects are generally regarded as occurring in a hierarchy, in which increasing attention to issues and raising awareness, for example, are regarded as being more amenable to media influence, and changes in individual behaviors and social attitudes are regarded as requiring more time and more integration with other strategies.

The extent to which media effects can be produced proactively, for example in public health campaigns, is strongly influenced by the use of certain strategies, such as careful planning, clear objectives, realistic goals, both formative and

outcome evaluation, repetition of a simple message that cuts through "media clutter," emphasis on positive rather than negative consequences, involvement of influential institutions and individuals, consideration of social context as well as individual behavior, good timing, multiple media, attention to key characteristics of segments of the audience, sustained effort, and, in particular, an integrated strategy that also includes interpersonal and community approaches (see for example Communications Consortium 1996; Dombro et al. 1996; Backer 1995a; Maibach and Parrott 1995; Winsten 1994a,b; Wallack et al. 1993; Backer, Rogers, and Sopory 1992; DeJong and Winsten 1990).

With respect to campaigns on behalf of parents and children, recent research for the Advertising Council by Public Agenda and others has found that it is important to use messages that address certain key audiences' concerns and beliefs, such as a prevalent belief that children's problems are caused by irresponsible parents, and also a belief that young people's lack of good character and values is an underlying problem. Participants in the research did not respond well to shock tactics, which left them feeling overwhelmed; they responded better to messages that conveyed the idea that parents are trying hard, that they are sometimes struggling temporarily with very difficult circumstances, and that, with assistance, they will succeed. Participants also related to the idea that it is tough for anyone to be a good parent, that it is the most important job in America, and that it often does not get appropriate recognition (Farkas and Johnson 1997; Dombro et al. 1996; Immerwahr 1995). Over half of respondents in the most recent phase of the research felt that helping children get a good start in life should be society's most important goal (Farkas and Johnson 1997).

Using such techniques, a number of media campaigns have shown evidence of influencing audiences, including audiences in which parents are a significant component (Dombro et al. 1996). The National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse (NCPCA), for example, reports that between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, the percentage of survey respondents who thought that child abuse was a serious problem jumped from 10 percent to 90 percent. Since 1988, there has been a 16 percent drop in parents who report hitting their children, and an 11 percent drop in parents who report insulting or swearing at their children (Daro 1997). These changes occurred in the context of major NCPCA campaigns, and a major increase in media coverage of child abuse as a problem, as well as a number of other social and political developments. While it is always difficult to establish a direct cause and effect connection, the media are credited with a significant role in putting child abuse on the national political agenda, particularly since the 1970s (Dombro et al. 1996; Nelson 1984).

Anecdotally, the television special in 1992 about child abuse, "Scared Silent," hosted by Oprah Winfrey, generated 220,000 calls to a toll-free number, most of which were from parents and children requesting help (Dombro et al. 1996). The *What Every Baby Knows* cable series with T. Berry Brazelton frequently hears from parents that have found it helpful in making parenting decisions, according to its producer, Hank O'Karma of New Screen Concepts (O'Karma 1995). On the advocacy front, a media campaign by a mother's group in a Chicago housing project is credited with generating significant attention to improving the appalling conditions in the project (Wallack and Dorfman 1996).

The evidence for media effects on parenting receives added support from theory and research that looks broadly at factors that change parenting behavior. Just as the research on the media suggests that parents are among the audiences who are influenced by the media, research on parenting behavior suggests that the media are among the forces that influence parents.

Although parenting is often thought to be largely instinctive, most theory and research posit that parenting is shaped by many environmental factors, including those involving the media (Holden 1997; Hamner and Turner 1996; Lerner et al. 1995; Luster and Okagaki 1993). The media, for instance, are in a position to influence parents' knowledge, their beliefs and attitudes, and the available social resources, all of which have been shown to influence parenting behavior and child outcomes.

For example, new knowledge, including the kinds of information that media provide, can be a surprisingly powerful component in influencing parenting behavior. Knowledge of child development has been shown to influence significantly both parents' interactions with children and children's cognitive development, in part by changing parents' expectations for their children's behavior (Tinsley and Lees 1995; Okagaki and Divecha 1993). Knowledge of child development even emerges as a key factor in enabling parents to care well for children in spite of the risks of poverty (Shore 1997). Consistent with these findings, age-paced newsletters, which present information on child development geared to the specific age of the parents' children, have appeared to contribute to changes in parenting attitudes and behaviors (Bogenschneider and Stone 1997; Riley 1992; Laurendeau et al. 1991; Riley et al. 1991).

The notion that powerful effects can be gained from providing information to parents is reinforced by research that shows most parents' knowledge of child development to be limited. This "information deficit," together with a "time crunch," emerge as the two fundamental barriers to better parenting, according to the report of a recent survey of parents of young children by the organization Zero to Three (1997a). Looking at parents of adolescents and a broad

range of kinds of information, Temple University psychologist Laurence Steinberg observes, "By far the biggest reason for the failure of parents to translate their best intentions into the right behavior is a lack of knowledge" (Steinberg 1996, p. 103).

Similarly, certain parenting beliefs and attitudes, again candidates for a media role, have been shown to influence parenting behavior and child outcomes, although the relationship is a complex one. Examples include beliefs about how children learn, about gender roles, about school achievement, about appropriate expectations at given ages, and about the needs of the work force (Holden 1995; McGillicuddy-De Lisi and Sigel 1995; Crouter and McHale 1993; Goodnow and Collins 1990; Comer 1989; Sigel 1985). Some beliefs in turn appear to be affected by expert advice, in some cases mediated by other family members (Okagaki and Divecha 1993; Young 1988). Cross-cultural studies also highlight the power of cultural beliefs in parenting (LeVine et al. 1996; Garcia Coll, Meyer, and Brillon 1995; Harkness and Super 1995; Okagaki and Divecha 1993; Zinn and Eitzen 1993; LeVine, Miller, and West 1988).

A hint of the media's power to affect parents' attitudes, both positively and negatively, is provided by a University of Michigan study about parents' beliefs regarding their children's mathematics aptitude. In 1980, the press announced that a major research study (Benbow and Stanley 1980) had shown boys to have greater mathematics ability than girls. Among parents exposed to the press coverage, beliefs about their own children's mathematics ability changed significantly, including in some unexpected ways. Among mothers exposed to the coverage, as predicted, their assessments of their own daughters' mathematics ability declined. Among fathers exposed to the coverage, however, their assessments of their daughters' ability actually increased, as if, the authors of the study hypothesize, the fathers were coming to their daughters' defense (Jacobs and Eccles 1985).

To the extent that the media can teach parenting skills, as part of a larger set of strategies, this intervention, too, has been shown to be important in influencing parenting behavior and child outcomes. Parenting behavior can change—even abusive behavior can be reduced—when parents are taught such skills as child management, anger management, advocacy, observation, problem-solving, and perspective-taking (see for example Chamberlain and Patterson 1995; Tinsley and Lees 1995; Shure 1994; Okagaki and Divecha 1993; Wurtele 1993). The need for a balance of nurturing and discipline skills has been underscored by recent research (for example Shore 1997; Baumrind 1996, 1991, 1989; Steinberg 1996; Holmbeck, Paikoff, and Brooks-Gunn 1995; Eisenberg and Murphy 1995; Paulson 1994; Steinberg et al. 1994; Lamborn et al. 1991;

Maccoby and Martin 1983). Consistency has also been shown to be important (Chamberlain and Patterson 1995; Eisenberg and Murphy 1995).

Finally, to the extent that the media influence the larger economic, social, and political context with which parents interact, the media also profoundly influence parenting and child outcomes. Poverty, isolation, and neighborhood violence have been shown to influence parenting practices including rates of child abuse (Garbarino and Kostelny 1995; Rogosch et al. 1995; Luster and Okagaki 1993; see also Shore 1997). A third body of knowledge, regarding the role of the media as a leisure activity and the effects of parents' and children's consumption of entertainment media, is discussed below.

In summary, there is reason at least to hypothesize that the mass media are and can be a powerful tool, as part of a multifaceted set of strategies, in supporting and informing parents and, by so doing, influencing children's healthy development. The quest to find the most effective ways to test and apply this tool has just begun.

Weaknesses in the Media's Role

While there are significant strengths in current media efforts to reach parents, there are also significant weaknesses, particularly in the coherence and availability of the knowledge base on which the media and the field depend. The most important weaknesses are as follows:

Easily accessible sources of information for the media on parenting topics are scarce and scattered.

Journalists and other media professionals who seek a body of knowledge on which to base their story decisions about parenting and family life often find that knowledge difficult to locate.

For one thing, resources are scattered across a range of disciplines, from psychology to law, from early childhood education to adult education, from medicine to social work and community development. They are housed in an array of separate institutions, including research centers such as Harvard's Project on Schooling and Children and the University of New Hampshire's Family Research Laboratory, professional organizations such as the Society for Research in Child Development and the American Medical Association, national parenting programs such as MELD and Parents as Teachers, advocacy organizations such as Children Now and the National Black Child Development Institute, government agencies such as the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the state Children's Trust Funds, a number of major foundations, and many individual experts.

Among professional societies alone, more than forty national organizations and dozens of regional organizations represent parenting researchers and practitioners, organizations such as the Family Resource Coalition, the National Council on Family Relations, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the Alliance of Work/Life Professionals, the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, the National Parent Aide Network, and the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families. Each houses a pocket of activity related to parenting education that is largely isolated from the parenting education activity of other organizations. Also, none of these organizations has parenting education as its primary mission, nor as its name, adding to the challenges of finding and coordinating information.

The difficulty in finding information about parenting and parenting education is compounded by the fact that parenting researchers and practitioners, with notable exceptions, often fail to recognize the importance of relationships with the media. For parenting researchers, all of the usual challenges prevail that have plagued interactions between researchers and the press for decades, such as assumptions within the research community about the value of populariza-

tion, assumptions within the media professions about the value of confrontation and controversy, the challenges of interpreting and evaluating social science research findings, and lack of training and understanding in each profession about the other (see for example Center for Health Communication 1996; Friedman, Dunwoody, and Rogers 1986).

For parenting educators, the barriers are exacerbated by an ambivalence about subjecting the field to the media spotlight, given its lack of maturity—a lack of maturity reflected not only in knowledge gaps but also in a largely underdeveloped theoretical foundation, concerns about credentials and standards, and questions about such issues as evaluation, definition, and cultural diversity (see Kagan 1995). This problem is underscored by the fact that many parenting educators themselves are not familiar with the body of knowledge on which practice is based, often having not been trained in the links among research, theory, and practice. For a field with so many practical implications for the larger society, parenting education remains surprisingly insular and relatively unorganized and unsophisticated about the ways in which the media could be helpful in fostering the very social and political attitudes that would allow the field to mature and thrive.

Parenting advice conveyed by the media is often confusing and conflicting.

Advice about parenting issues in the mass media varies dramatically from source to source and from day to day, reflecting inconsistencies and uncertainty within the professional community, conventions within the media, and their interaction with a wide variety of other factors. This fluctuation and inconsistency leaves parents confused, anxious, and skeptical, and thus often disempowered and alienated from some of the very resources that might be helpful in providing information and support.

For example, on the subject of spanking, three conflicting streams of advice are currently being promulgated simultaneously. First, within literature that takes its authority from Christian conservative religion, parents are encouraged to spank children as part of a program of teaching children to respect parental authority, continuing a long tradition of physical punishment as a means to break children's wills and instill piety (Greven 1990). James Dobson, the best-selling author of Christian parenting books such as *The New Dare to Discipline*, rejecting the "psychologists and pediatricians and university professors [who] have all gotten into the act," sets out a program of spanking "with a switch or a paddle" to the buttocks, to begin at eighteen months and end between ten and twelve years (Dobson 1992, pp. 11, 64–65).

Second, within literature that draws on scientific authority, parents are cautioned that research studies find spanking to be significantly harmful, linked to marital violence, crime, suicide, depression, and reduced economic achievement (Straus 1994). Third, within literature that appeals to parents' own "instincts" and "common sense," and thus falls back on prevailing customs, parents find beliefs and practices to be mixed (see for example Miller and Reibstein 1997; *Parade* 1994). In a 1996 survey by the Commonwealth Fund, one-quarter of parents of two-year-olds used spanking sometimes or often, another 41 percent rarely, while a third reported that they never did (Young, Davis, and Schoen 1996). Similarly, in a 1994 Gallup poll, 68 percent approved of spanking, down significantly from 1968, when 94 percent of respondents approved of spanking (Straus and Mathur 1994).

Contributing to the confusion are assertions by some leaders in the African American community that spanking is more extensive and better accepted among African Americans than European Americans. This assertion is widely debated among African Americans, although it is supported to a limited degree by some research (Young, Davis, and Schoen 1996; see also Baumrind 1996). To the extent that it is true, leaders observe, African Americans feel alienated from media strictures against spanking (Lessons 1996).

Similarly, the concept of building children's self-esteem, widely stressed as central to children's healthy development in the past few decades, is now generating a controversy. Researchers such as Martin Seligman and William Damon claim that efforts to enhance children's self-esteem typically backfire, because they are not linked to the child's genuine accomplishments. Self-esteem without competency, they argue, results in increased risks of depression, low achievement, and even violence (Palmer 1996; Damon 1995; Seligman 1995). Adding to the confusion is debate over the extent to which self-esteem is promoted in the way the critics describe, and the extent to which it is promoted in more effective ways not addressed by their argument.

Other recent changes in media advice include shifts in emphasis of various kinds. For example, the role of fathers and fathering has increasingly been given more attention, after being virtually ignored at the turn of the century (Jorgensen 1996; Rubiner 1996; Weiss 1985; Bigner 1994; Young 1990; Sunley 1955). Also receiving more attention now are family activities and leisure, continuing a trend that emerged as a concept after World War II; before that time, parents were often advised not to have fun with children and in fact were warned that it could be seriously harmful to a child's development (Young 1990; Wolfenstein 1955). An emphasis today on teaching children values and providing moral and religious education echoes early American child-rearing advice, in which the shaping of character and engendering of religious values

were primary goals of parenting, but it represents a shift from the emphasis on psychological authorities and healthy emotional development that has dominated most of the twentieth century (Stendler 1950). Advice now to delay weaning and toilet training until a child is ready and to feed babies on demand was also the rule a century ago, but rigid schedules and limits were in effect both before (Sunley 1955) and after (Wolfenstein 1955). Other significant shifts in media emphasis include the focus on early childhood, which has been seen as a critical phase in parenting since the 1920s, although its importance was considered secondary to the issues and needs of adolescence in the early twentieth century (Schlossman 1976).

Looking more broadly at changes over time, researchers have found that virtually the only constant in media parenting advice is change (Young 1990; Studenski 1985; Carlson and Crase 1983; Senn 1975; Sunley 1955; Wolfenstein 1955; Vincent 1951; Stendler 1950). All told, they describe at least four major shifts in media parenting advice just within the twentieth century, varying profoundly not only in parenting practices but also with respect to authorities who have credibility, assumptions about the nature of children and the parenting role, and goals for what constitutes a successful job of child-rearing. At the turn of the century, mothers were central and idealized, babies were to be indulged, the church was still the ultimate authority, but mother's instinct was also important as a source of parenting wisdom. In the 1920s and 1930s, ideas from behaviorism predominated, with emphasis on curbing children's innately misguided impulses through rigid external control, conditioning children to grow up to be independent, industrious adults. In the 1940s and 1950s, behaviorism fell from favor, to be replaced with a framework, often associated with Benjamin Spock, author of the seminal *Baby and Child Care*, that emphasized the child's inner needs and the parents' role as supporting the child's own developmental timetable, creating an environment that would produce happy, outgoing adults. In the 1970s and 1980s, with some elements of the two earlier periods, an interactional framework emphasized a balancing of adult and children's needs, acknowledging the roles of both nature and nurture, listening both to science and to inner wisdom, and providing both nurture and limits, in order to produce adults who are both happy and productive.

A number of forces interact to create the continual change and conflict in parenting advice, including findings and assumptions within the research community, prevailing views among leading professionals who work with parents, economic pressures, media assumptions and customs, cultural assumptions, audience characteristics, and broad political and social change.

One of the forces contributing to the fluctuations in media advice is fluctuations and inconsistencies within the research and professional communities that serve

as the media's primary sources on parenting topics. For example, many of the swings in media advice noted above exemplify a long-standing tension within the professional community, interacting with the larger culture, between permissive and authoritarian child-rearing approaches. Broad swings from permissive to authoritarian approaches and back again have occurred in experts' advice to parents at least once a century, and, in this century, more frequently (Kagan 1994; Studenski 1985; Aries 1962; Vincent 1951; Stendler 1950).

It has been argued that the high level of conflict in parenting advice today presages another swing away from permissiveness and toward more authoritarian parenting (Mack 1997; Iovine 1996; Elkind 1994; Kagan 1994). The controversy about self-esteem, for example, is reminiscent of concerns about coddling children that have followed periods of permissiveness in the past—such as the shift to stricter discipline in the early twentieth century after a permissive swing at the end of the nineteenth, as well as a shift to more restrictive practices at the end of the seventeenth century after the more relaxed sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Aries 1962). Transitional periods have been common in the past, often occurring between periods of relative certainty, always with a swing toward either a more uniformly permissive or authoritarian approach within a decade or two (Studenski 1985; Sunley 1955; Stendler 1950).

More optimistically, the current controversies could reflect an effort finally to integrate the best of both permissive and authoritarian models in a balanced approach of a kind advocated by some researchers (for example Baumrind 1996) and reflected in some media (Studenski 1985). The fluctuation from "child-centered" to "parent-centered" may also be moving toward more holistic "family-centered" and "community-centered" approaches that incorporate and expand on the best of both models (Carter 1997).

A particularly key role within the interactions between the scholarly community and the media is played by the experts who become regular sources for media parenting advice. In part because of media criteria for choosing expert sources, the task of speaking on behalf of parenting issues often falls to a relatively small stable of media experts. While experts may be viewed slightly more skeptically than a few decades ago, the authority to give parenting advice is still vested largely in psychologists, educators, physicians, and, to some extent, professional writers (Clarke-Stewart 1978). For centuries parenting advice was primarily the province of religious leaders; doctors and educators were added in the nineteenth century, journalists and writers in the early twentieth century, and psychologists and child guidance specialists in the 1920s (see Bigner 1994; Studenski 1985).

The experts' role, however, interacts with a number of characteristics of audiences, including their beliefs and demographic factors (see for example Goodnow 1995; Kegan 1994; Young 1988). Historian Julia Grant documents the ambivalence of mothers to parenting "by the book" in the early and mid-twentieth century, a practice that would in fact have been ridiculed before the twentieth century. In Grant's study, mothers, while participating in study groups and purchasing books, continued to evaluate professional advice in the light of "common sense," and its impact on their practices remained unclear (Grant forthcoming, 1994). Others have noted differences between child-rearing advice and experts' beliefs on the one hand and parents' beliefs and behavior on the other in a number of periods of history (Bigner 1994; Young 1988; Mechling 1975), suggesting that the processes by which parents make decisions and evaluate environmental influences are indeed complex and in need of much more clarification. Ronald David, formerly at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and now chief medical officer at District of Columbia General Hospital, argues that a distrust of the "expertocracy" is healthy, and that expert advice handcuffs parents, limiting their own creativity (David 1997). Others argue that it is important to empower parents, encouraging them to evaluate experts' advice and providing them with the tools for this level of thinking (see for example Heath 1983).

On the other hand, parents seeking information from the media are often anxious, an anxiety that researchers first noted in the 1940s (Zero to Three 1997a; Hulbert 1996; Weiss 1985; Wolfenstein 1955; Stendler 1950). This anxiety may arise in part from the very swiftness with which one paradigm has been replaced by another, and in part from the growing predominance of scientific and medical experts as parenting mentors. Such anxiety may be exacerbated by the media's own efforts to increase the demand for parenting information by increasing parents' anxiety about lacking information, the so-called "watch or die" phenomenon. Anxiety, however, can also work against parents' receptivity to information (Zero to Three 1997b; Immerwahr 1995), and the factors involved are not entirely clear.

Also interacting, of course, with scholarly advances, expert sources, and their audiences are the social and political forces in which they occur, and to which they contribute (Kagan 1994; Luster and Okagaki 1993; Lightfoot and Valsiner 1992; Kagan, Kearsley, and Zelazo 1978). Thus, for example, reasons given for the shift toward more permissive child-rearing advice after World War II have included popular revulsion against the tragic effects of Fascism, a desire for providing children with a peaceful environment, a post-war boom in less competitive jobs, the need for more demanding tasks for women returning to full-time homemaking, and audiences' distaste for rigid behavioristic parenting

practices that they had not been able to follow successfully (Grant forthcoming; Studenski 1985). The subsequent shift in expert advice in magazines in the 1970s and 1980s—in which emphasis was on diversity of family structure, the competence of fathers as caregivers, the importance of "quality time," the resilience of children, and the importance of parents' own needs—corresponds with dramatic increases in young mothers in the paid work force, a slowing of the economy, an increasing divorce rate, and other factors (Young 1990; Studenski 1985; Carlson and Crase 1983).

Nonetheless, overarching the cycles, some aspects of parenting advice seem to be fairly consistently evolving in a single direction. The tolerance of child abuse, for example, has decreased over the centuries, as the understanding of the distinctive characteristics and needs of children has increased (Daro 1997; French 1995; deMause 1988; Aries 1962). Thus, some cultural evolution appears to be operating, taking child-rearing practices, on average, in a positive direction.

Other important roles in the interactions affecting media advice are played, of course, by media practices and assumptions. Particularly important are media perceptions of what sells to consumers and to advertisers—including the perception that audiences are attracted by conflict and controversy. Thus, to whatever extent the professional community generates controversy, the media are likely to exacerbate it, and vice versa. The role of advertising on parenting content has also been a concern among analysts since at least 1924 (Schlossman 1983).

Also influential are changing demographics in the media, including an increase in the number of women and parents within the journalism and entertainment professions. The literature is full of anecdotes about reporters, gatekeepers, entrepreneurs, and scriptwriters choosing to highlight certain aspects of parenting because these were situations they were addressing at home with their own children (Fleming 1997; Rickel 1996; Woodhull 1996; Trost 1994; Marc 1989).

While all of these forces interact in all areas of media coverage, they hold sway more strongly in areas like parenting education where the knowledge base is often scattered, poorly consolidated and analyzed, ineffectively disseminated, and relatively disconnected from practice.

Parents of adolescents receive less information and support from the media than parents of younger children.

Within the rich mix of media attention to parenting, some parents receive far less information than others, as indicated above. One important group that is thus relatively shortchanged are the parents of adolescents, including early adolescents.

According to many studies, the needs of early adolescence and adolescence are urgent, and failure to meet them adequately creates serious risks for adolescents, their families, and society. Furthermore, the role of parents is one of several critical factors in meeting these needs (Furstenberg et al. forthcoming; Carnegie Council 1995; Hauser 1991; National Commission 1991a; Small 1990; Carnegie Council 1989). To carry out their responsibility effectively, parents of teens require very different skills and information than parents of younger children. Yet this problem has not been high on the media's agenda in recent years.

Clearly there exist a number of excellent media resources devoted to teen development, including books, parenting education curricula (see Children's Trust Fund 1997), and campaigns to promote social programs and issues that benefit teens, such as those of the Partnership for a Drug-Free America and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, as well as the CBS network's initiative, "Class of 2000."

However, their numbers and visibility do not compare to those for parents of younger children. As noted in the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's concluding report, "Although an industry of books, videos, and experts exists for parents with young children, much less information is available to parents with adolescent children" (Carnegie Council 1995, pp. 63–64).

For example, Laura Stepp, a *Washington Post* reporter specializing in teens and preteens, has received letters from parents saying they wished there were more information available about raising teens. She is now writing a book herself about families of teens, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, to help fill the gap in information about parenting teens. She also observes that, in part because of the small demand from reporters, scholars studying adolescence seem to be particularly reluctant to discuss their findings and the practical implications (Stepp 1997; see also Small 1990). A related problem, according to Stepp, is that the research has often been done on clinical populations, and that researchers do not make clear the extent to which these findings can be extrapolated to "average kids" (Stepp 1997).

The concern about the needs of adolescents in no way suggests that the needs of young children are not critically important. To the extent that resources are available for parents of younger children, their presence is essential, reflecting the recognition of the profound impact of early development on later life, of the critical role of parents in these early years, and of the demand from new parents for information and support.

However, the adolescent years have also been identified as a time when critical and complex developmental changes take place (Noam 1996; Carnegie Council 1995; Holmbeck, Paikoff, and Brooks-Gunn 1995; Noam et al. 1994; Takanishi 1993; Vaillant 1993; Small 1990; Carnegie Council 1989). Early adolescence, it has been argued, is "unmatched in the juxtaposition of simultaneous changes—cognitive, biological, social, and emotional—by any other period in the life span" (Takanishi 1993, p. 3). Richard Jessor and Shirley L. Jessor of the University of Colorado describe adolescence as "the life stage in which the events and experiences occur that are most formative for later personality and action. One need not diminish the importance of other stages of life or deny the fact that all periods are potentially formative to sustain such an emphasis on adolescence and youth; the argument is simply that this period is something of a crucible for the shaping of later life" (Jessor and Jessor 1977, p. 5).

These changes in the adolescent tend to trigger shifts in family patterns as well. For example, teens' new abilities to think more abstractly, their physical maturity, and their broader social opportunities interact with parents' own developmental changes, parenting practices, and family rules (Kegan 1994; Steinberg 1994; Hauser 1991; Galinsky 1987). This is particularly true because the changes occur over such an extended period of years (Carnegie Council 1995; Holmbeck, Paikoff, and Brooks-Gunn 1995; Wigfield and Eccles 1994; Jessor and Jessor 1977).

To address these changes and their accompanying challenges, parents urgently need new information and skills (Furstenberg et al. forthcoming; Steinberg 1996; Holmbeck, Paikoff, and Brooks-Gunn 1995; Eccles et al. 1993; Hauser 1991). Jacquelynne Eccles of the University of Michigan and others have described the need for "developmentally responsive family environments," in which families adapt their parenting practices in response to their teens' changing abilities and experiences in the world, such as with respect to level of autonomy. "Families, like schools, are confronted with a difficult problem: providing an environment that changes in the right way and at the right pace . . . . There is a great need for programs that will help parents with this difficult task" (Eccles et al. 1993, p. 99).

Furthermore, parents need not only the kinds of information that will allow them to negotiate the changing relationships at home but also the kinds of information that will allow them to help their teens to negotiate the widening world around them. This latter concept, that is, the importance of "family management" of the larger environment, has emerged from recent research by the MacArthur Foundation Network on Successful Adolescent Development among Youth in High-Risk Settings (Furstenberg et al. forthcoming; Jessor 1993). Family management strategies include, for example, selection of neigh-

borhoods and schools, protection from dangers, and creation of contacts and social networks for children.

The need for new information and support is particularly urgent because parents of adolescents are exposed to a number of misleading messages in mainstream culture that undermine their ability to support teens. A common belief, for example, is that parents need to disengage from their teens' lives, as peers and other adults take on greater roles. On the contrary, as the study *Adolescents and Their Families* puts it, "the deep challenge and paradox of adolescent development [is] to separate from the family while connecting with it in new ways"; in fact, one of the main skills that parents need is "enduring engagement," or simply "hanging in" (Hauser 1991, pp. 3, 242).

In keeping with the cultural myths, parent involvement in children's lives declines as children become adolescents, although teens themselves report that they would like to spend more time talking with their parents about problems, about feelings, about values, about the future. If they were available, it is to parents that teens would turn first about some of the really important issues (Steinberg 1996; Holmbeck, Paikoff, and Brooks-Gunn 1995; Families and Work Institute 1993; Takanishi 1993; National Commission 1991b; Hayden cited in Lickona 1983). "If there is a recurring lament that is shared by adolescents from all backgrounds, it is the lack of available adults who listen, hear, understand, and guide them," according to Ruby Takanishi, then executive director of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. "The evidence is so strong, so counter to what prevailing wisdom is, that it requires us to rethink how parents and families can be brought back constructively into adolescents' lives" (Takanishi 1993, p. 3). Parent involvement in school also decreases with age, although teens are more likely to do well in school if parents stay involved (Steinberg 1996; Paulson 1994; United States Department of Education 1994; Zill and Nord 1994).

A second set of misleading cultural messages conveys the idea that the teen years are inevitably stormy, and that nothing can prevent parent-teen relationships from becoming distant, hostile, and problematical. Once again, research suggests that serious problems are not inevitable, and that the challenge is to identify the interactive factors, including family characteristics, that allow some adolescents to negotiate this period successfully, while others falter (Furstenberg et al. forthcoming; Holmbeck, Paikoff, and Brooks-Gunn 1995; Steinberg 1994; Wigfield and Eccles 1994; Eccles et al. 1993; Hauser 1991; Steinberg and Levine 1991; Werner 1990).

For commercial media, however, these cultural beliefs exacerbate a "catch-22," in which resources for parents of teens are not provided because there is less

demand for them from parents or professionals. Yet the fact that media resources are not more available for parents of early adolescents and adolescents potentially reinforces the misleading messages that parents do not play an important role in these later years.

Furthermore, teenagers and parents of teens are battling, if preliminary research and anecdotal evidence are to be believed, powerful negative images about teenagers in news and entertainment media, images of teens plagued with problems of drugs, crime, and violence. Content analyses of news coverage in 1993 by the Berkeley Media Studies Group and by Children Now, for example, indicate that youth are depicted predominantly as victims or perpetrators of crime and violence (Dorfman et al. in press; Kunkel 1996, 1994; Dorfman and Woodruff 1995; Woodruff, Dorfman, and Winett 1995). In local television news, 6 percent of stories about youth cite positive accomplishments, 51 percent involve violence, and rarely with any indication of possible risk factors or context (Dorfman et al. in press; Dorfman and Woodruff 1995). Smaller studies and proprietary research have found similar emphasis on children as victims and perpetrators, which is presumably a reflection in part of media emphasis on crime and violence in general (Frank 1994; Roberts 1993). Similarly, in newspaper stories focusing on policy issues, younger children are typically framed as "vulnerable innocents" but teenagers are framed as "troubled teens." Adolescents are "cynical, violent, and up to no good," and they are "too threatening, or not innocent enough" to warrant policy solutions (Woodruff, Dorfman, and Winett 1995). A recent survey by Public Agenda found public attitudes toward teens, even among parents, to be predominantly negative; two-thirds of Americans, asked what comes to their minds when they think of today's teenagers, responded with negative adjectives such as "rude," "irresponsible," and "wild" (Farkas and Johnson 1997).

These stereotypes are further complicated, notes Susan Bales, director of children's programs at the Benton Foundation, by their resonance with complex feelings in the culture about sex, age, and race, in particular about children having sex and about African American males (Bales 1997). Not surprisingly, Shanto Iyengar, professor of political science at University of California, Los Angeles, has concluded, from studies of viewers' ability to recall the ages of suspects in gang-related crime stories, that viewers associate gangs with juveniles, in particular when the gang members are African American (Iyengar 1997).

As Stephen A. Small, chair of the Department of Child and Family Studies at University of Wisconsin-Madison puts it, ironically, parents suffer no shortage in information about the challenges of adolescence—just about what to do about them (Small 1997). Journalists have also noted this phenomenon; writer Mike Males calls today's adolescents "the scapegoat generation" (Males 1996)

and *San Jose Mercury* reporters John Hubner and Jill Wolfson argue that "the dismay over youth has taken on unprecedented pessimism and outrage" (Hubner and Wolfson 1996, p. 239). Children and teens in surveys have complained of these negative images, and critics have noted them in film as well as on television (Giroux 1996; Kendrick 1995; Children Now 1994). Laurence Steinberg notes that, in both television and film, teens are depicted as having a pervasive lack of commitment to school (Steinberg 1996).

In short, thus far, the mass media have reflected and reinforced the culture's negative images of teens and its negative myths about the parenting of teens. For parents of teens, the mass media have tended to be part of the problem more than they have been part of the solution.

Entertainment television has been largely overlooked as a source of influence on parenting and as a vehicle for supporting and informing parents.

Amid all of the recent efforts to extend the reach of parenting information, a media format with potentially very significant reach has largely been ignored: entertainment television. Within television situation comedies, dramas, soap operas, films, television movies, and other entertainment formats, relationships among parents, children, and families are a common focus, and have been since the beginning of television (Glennon and Butsch 1982).

In particular, family-oriented situation comedies are "the most enduring and popular type of television program on the air," according to researcher Muriel Cantor (1991). While other formats have waxed and waned, from westerns and musical variety to crime drama and adventure, situation comedies, including those that are family-oriented, have consistently been among the most common formats (Condry 1989). Different families are attracted to different shows, in part based on ethnicity and other similarities between viewer and characters (BBDO New York 1996, 1995; Dorr and Rabin 1995), but overall their appeal is broadbased, enduring in part because they deliver family audiences to advertisers.

In a typical episode of many family sitcoms (and dramas), literally dozens of parenting skills, beliefs, and behaviors are depicted. In a content analysis of family-oriented programming airing in 1982, Paula Dail identified an average of twenty parenting behaviors being exhibited per program (Dail and Way 1985; Dail 1983). In a content analysis of the five top family-oriented situation comedies in the fall of 1990, Charles Aust identified over seventy "communication skills" per episode, such as courtesy, self-disclosure, affection, active listening, spending special time together, praise, setting limits, problem-solving, and teaching a skill or promoting insight (Aust 1992). Also, in a content analy-

sis of 1990 situation comedies, Amy Jordan found that adult-child interactions involved principally talking and bantering, but also a substantial amount of advising and directing of children (Jordan 1995). Other studies have noted that family sitcoms typically focus on common emotional situations, of the kinds that parents and children experience in day-to-day life, with an emphasis on negative emotions and solving problems (Weiss and Wilson 1996). Still others have noted the power implied by the ability of sitcoms and other weekly programs to create "para-social" relationships with audiences, in which the lead characters come to seem like friends whom the viewer "knows" (Hobbs 1997; Meyrowitz 1985).

To the extent that the content of television sitcoms has been analyzed and critiqued, the results suggest that the messages parents are receiving about family life, and the models of parenting behavior, are mixed. On the one hand, television families are portrayed as supportive, loving, and helpful, with parents taking a middle ground between permissive and strict approaches to discipline (Dail 1983). Feelings are expressed and problems solved (Skill, Wallace, and Cassata 1990). Parents remain in control, and parent-child communication is preserved: "For the most part," note the authors of *Prime Time*, "we have seen families where wise, tolerant, and communicative parents stay firmly in control by offering gentle guidance to inquisitive and quick-witted children" (Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman 1994, pp. 176–177).

Family structures have become increasingly varied in entertainment programming, and the issues confronting them increasingly complex and serious, but the affirmation of the value of family life and unfailing parental wisdom has remained. This same tendency to portray families as a key to happiness and a mainstay of life has been noted in American films as well (Goodman 1996; Kaplan 1994; Levy 1991; Kohn 1988).

On the other hand, the problems encountered by television, while increasingly complex, are resolved with superhuman speed and ease; in recent studies, parents solved problems 95 percent of the time (Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman 1994), 90 percent in a half hour (Aust 1996). Also, they did so working largely in isolation, based on their own good wisdom, neither needing nor seeking support or information from extended family, community, or religious institutions. This nuclear isolation runs counter to patterns of support typical of many cultural groups, such as African Americans, and to the recommendations of most professionals (Robinson 1996).

Other concerns include the fact that parents' roles remain divided along gender lines, fathers more prominent and more often responded to by children, mothers more emotionally expressive—and more successful if they stay in traditional

roles (Cantor 1991; Skill, Wallace, and Cassata 1990; Dail and Way 1985). Women on television are more likely than men to talk about romantic relationships, men are more likely than women to talk about work and to be shown engaging in work (Signorelli 1997). The marginalization of women and emphasis on the success of traditional roles has also been noted in American films (Signorelli 1997; Harrower 1995; Kaplan 1994). Women are actually underrepresented in television and film, according to a recent study, constituting 45 percent of television characters, 42 percent of television models, and 37 percent of movie characters (Signorelli 1997). Questions also persist about the portrayal of fathers as bumbling and inept, ineffectual at addressing family issues (Robbins 1996; Dorr and Rabin 1995; LaRossa et al. 1991; Rubinstein and Brown 1985; Barcus 1983; Glennon and Butsch 1982).

A related concern is that, at times, adults are portrayed as child-like and children as adult-like, with children sometimes even "parenting" their parents. In a content analysis of 1990 situation comedies, adults confided in children twice as often as children confided in adults, and children frequently gave advice to parents, including about how to discipline other siblings (Jordan 1995). Similarly, in American films, it has been noted that parents are often portrayed, as in *Home Alone*, as absent or ineffectual, while it is the children who cope successfully by using their own wits (Carr 1995; Medved 1992).

Dysfunction, lack of stability, and strained family relations are portrayed more prominently in talk shows (Heaton and Wilson 1995) and in soap operas (Pingree and Thompson 1990). Clearly there are also exceptions to the positive family picture in most sitcoms, as evidenced by the success of *Married . . . with Children*, which depicts a singularly dysfunctional family; ending in spring 1997 after ten seasons, it has been television's longest running sitcom (Biddle 1997).

A Children Now poll found that 65 percent of children ages ten to sixteen agreed that shows like *The Simpsons* and *Married . . . with Children* encourage kids to disrespect their parents (Children Now 1995; see also Van Evra 1990). Questions have also been raised about whether, in the interests of preserving humor, family members are targeted for put-downs at the expense of each other (Skill, Wallace, and Cassata 1990; Miller 1988). Some critics, including author Alfie Kohn, also express concern that television portrays parents as manipulating children into compliance (Kohn 1997).

A Children Now study found that young children appeared less frequently on television than older children and teens, and primarily in background roles and as "props," setting up the plot for the adults in the program. Also, antisocial, even physically aggressive, behaviors were often successful in meeting children's goals (Heintz-Knowles 1995).

Concern also continues about the depiction of African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans on television, as Joy Duckett Cain, parenting columnist for *Essence*, notes (Cain 1996). These groups are still underrepresented, while wealthy and middle-class European-American families are over-represented on American entertainment television (Dorr et al. in press; O'Connor 1996; Navarrete 1994). Latinos are particularly underrepresented in relation to their proportion of the population, "almost invisible" in entertainment and news, and, when they appear, portrayed in a generally negative manner (Navarrete 1994). Native-American, Asian-American, and inter-racial families are similarly rare or absent (Dorr et al. in press; Signorelli 1997).

With respect to the impact of these messages on parents, research is limited, although some inferences are suggested by the large body of research on the impact of entertainment programming on children's perceptions of family life and gender roles (see for example Dorr and Rabin 1995; Bryant 1990; Van Evra 1990; Condry 1989; Bryant and Zillman 1986; Barcus 1983; Buerkel-Rothfuss et al. 1982; Liebert, Sprafkin, and Davidson 1982; Greenberg 1980; Comstock et al. 1978). Consistent with the data on messages in family programming, for example, children's viewing of television family shows is associated with more traditional views of gender roles, as well as a perception that families are supportive; children report television families to be both realistic and like the families they hope to have when they grow up (Dorr and Rabin 1995; Brown and Bryant 1990; Van Evra 1990; Buerkel-Rothfuss et al. 1982).

Entertainment programming also can be presumed to have indirect effects on parents arising from the sheer quantity of children's and parents' time spent watching television; children, for example, watch an average of three and one-half hours of television per day (Hobbs 1997; Nielsen Media Research 1997). Over half of U.S. children have a television set in their room (Mediascope 1996). Other indirect effects on parents may occur from changes in children's behavior that result from watching television, which in turn affect their interactions with parents. While still controversial, research studies suggest that entertainment programming encourages aggressive behaviors in children, for example, and perhaps to some extent "prosocial" behaviors such as helping others as well (see for example Dorr and Rabin 1995; Van Evra 1990).

Contributing to the interactional nature of these effects, parents can influence the nature and extent of the effects of television on children by co-viewing and by commenting or mediating while the family watches; parenting styles, values, social class, and children's viewing habits tend to be correlated (Dorr and Rabin 1995; Jordan 1992; Bryant 1990; Desmond, Singer, and Singer 1990; Van Evra 1990; Dorr, Kovaric, and Doubleday 1989).

Anecdotally, Alvin Poussaint, Harvard Medical School psychiatrist and consultant to *The Cosby Show*, notes that parents frequently told him that they used the program as a source of ideas and modeling about appropriate parenting behavior (Poussaint 1997). When a 1995 episode of *Grace Under Fire* showed single mother Grace giving her son a Christmas gift as if it were from his estranged father, the incident sparked a running debate in an advice column about whether or not she did the right thing (Oliver 1994). "Something about Amelia," a television movie that aired in 1984, is credited by Anne Cohn Donnelly, head of the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, with opening up the subject of incest for media and policy agenda-setting (Lessons 1996).

Thus, a mix of research on children's viewing, anecdotes, and media criticism presents a mix of perspectives. They await further research and analysis in order to answer pressing questions about the role of the powerful entertainment industry on parents and parenting.

In summary, significant drawbacks, both weaknesses in the availability and quality of the knowledge base and gaps in areas of coverage and analysis, have compromised the ability of the media to contribute effectively to the well-being of parents and families. These gaps, however, are also windows of opportunity. Below are a few recommendations for making significant progress by strengthening these weak areas in cost-effective ways.

Recommendations

A number of concrete steps could be expected to have significant impact on the quality and quantity of efforts to reach parents via the media. The recommendations below focus on the central weakness in current efforts: the lack of coherence and accessibility of the knowledge base about parenting on which the media, as well as professionals who work with parents, depend. Specifically, the recommendations propose, first, supporting the consolidation and integration of information about parenting by holding consensus-building conferences, and, second, a comprehensive communications strategy to disseminate their findings. Special attention is given to current gaps in media attention to parenting. In more detail, the recommendations are as follows:

Strengthen the knowledge base about parenting, in particular by holding consensus-building conferences.

Research and professional activity related to parenting are embedded in so many different fields that the first step in advancing both the field of parenting education and its media applications is to address the knowledge base. Researchers and practitioners need to come together to consolidate findings and to analyze the extent to which there is agreement, disagreement, and uncertainty, so that they, as well as parents, media, policy makers, and others, will have a clearer sense of what is known and not known.

Powerful steps in consolidating and clarifying knowledge can be accomplished in particular by holding consensus-building conferences. The purpose of these conferences would be to bring together leaders in order to exchange information, to integrate existing knowledge from both research and practice, and to identify those areas in which there is widespread (albeit never universal) agreement, areas in which there is significant difference of opinion, and areas in need of further study.

Given the diversity of approaches to parenting, the heavy role of values, the importance of cultural traditions, and the inevitable limitations of social science research, is any consensus of opinion possible? Researchers and practitioners from a range of fields and perspectives believe that it is (Balter 1997; Bornstein 1997; Brazelton 1997; Carballeira 1997; Carter 1997; David 1997; Galinsky 1997; Heath 1997; Kagan 1997; LeVine 1997; Noam 1997; Palm 1997; Poussaint 1997; Small 1997; Zuckerman 1997; Steinberg 1996).

These leaders agree that research findings and practical experience have accumulated to the point that there is a critical mass of knowledge, that within that body of knowledge there is a significant common ground, and that the time has come to pause and take stock. While they note, as Harvard University anthropologist Robert LeVine puts it, that some scholars seek complete uniformity and others argue for complete cultural and moral relativism, most fall in

between; "there is a growing sense that there exists a serious middle ground that continues to emerge" (LeVine 1997). Temple University psychologist Laurence Steinberg, who specializes in adolescent development, agrees: "I think it is possible to specify *some* broad parameters of effective parenting and desirable child outcomes that allow plenty of room to accommodate cultural diversity without being absolutely paralyzed by cultural relativism" (Steinberg 1996, p. 132).

In particular, there is potential for agreement, based on an integration of existing research and practical knowledge, with respect to addressing some of the fundamental questions underlying parenting advice: What are the commonly held goals that parents and society have for children and child-rearing? What do children and adolescents need from parents if these goals are to be met? What do parents need, in the way of information and resources, to provide what children and adolescents need? What do professionals, including media, policy makers, advocates, parenting educators, and other human service providers, need to know in order to work effectively with parents?

Agreement on aspects of these questions, while powerful, would in no way compromise the important role of diversity in parenting. As LeVine describes, some goals may be universal, but strategies tend to be cultural, and behaviors individual (LeVine 1988). For example, across cultures, ultimate economic self-sufficiency is a widely (although not universally) held parental goal, while strategies vary. Latino families, according to Nicolas Carballeira, head of the Latino Health Institute, often continue to support a child financially for a longer period into young adulthood than is typical for European American families (Carballeira 1997). At the level of each individual, parents also bring to parenting decisions and behaviors a unique profile, including such characteristics as strengths, knowledge, attitudes, skills, values, learning style, cognitive style, personality, resources, and background experiences, as well as characteristics of the child, issues of timing, and overall family needs (Heath forthcoming; Heath 1997). Consensus-building, in other words, would affirm both the common ground and the differences that emerge from honoring and understanding parenting across cultures and individual styles.

Although the concept of consensus-building conferences on parenting is new, a good deal of intellectual groundwork has been laid. A few individual researchers have explored the concept of universal or widely held principles in parenting. For example, Harvard University anthropologist Robert LeVine, who studies parenting across cultures, has proposed three universal goals of parenting, which he describes as survival, health, and "life chances," using the terminology of sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf; life chances might be described as those goals, including economic self-sufficiency, that are played out in the

interaction between the choices offered ("options") and the limitations imposed ("ligatures") in an individual's social structure (LeVine 1997; LeVine and White 1986; Dahrendorf 1979; see also LeVine 1988).

Other researchers have proposed the existence of central parenting roles. For example, Marc Bornstein, discussing the parenting of infants, delineates four categories: nurturant caregiving (meeting children's physical needs for sustenance, protection, supervision, etc.); material caregiving (managing the environment including its level of constraint and stimulation); social caregiving (the behaviors that create and regulate interpersonal exchanges); and didactic caregiving (strategies for motivating, stimulating, teaching, and guiding children in their understanding of the world) (Bornstein 1995b). Some analysts add a concept of advocacy, or what Robert LeVine calls "sponsorship," in which parents work to enhance their children's life chances and to prevent them from falling behind in whatever ways the culture defines as success or failure (LeVine 1997; Smith et al. 1994).

Still other researchers have suggested some areas of potential consensus even with regard to specific parenting strategies. For instance, Harvard University Professor Jerome Kagan speculates that consensus might emerge with respect to young children on several points: (1) encouraging your child's language development, such as by talking to your child, introducing new vocabulary, and introducing books; (2) communicating that you value your child, in whatever way is appropriate to your culture, values, and temperament; (3) being reasonably consistent in disciplining your child, whatever approach to discipline you take; and (4) displaying whatever values you want your child to adopt (Kagan 1997). Carballeira sees possible common ground also around the importance of parental involvement, such as by means of family meals, and the limiting of "technological baby-sitting" (Carballeira 1997). LeVine suggests that consensus might emerge on the importance of a primary attachment figure, and of stability. He also predicts consensus around certain strictures, such as certain kinds of child labor (see United Nations 1997). A number of other researchers have suggested possible core parenting principles (see for example Holden 1997; Steinberg 1996; Bornstein 1995a; Goleman 1995; Sternberg and Williams 1995; Kegan 1994; Takanishi 1993; Hauser 1991; Small 1990); also, efforts have begun to consolidate research knowledge, although not with a focus on identifying common ground (see for example Bornstein 1995a; Smith forthcoming; and a proposed special issue on parenting of the journal *Daedalus* [Graubard 1997]).

Additional groundwork for consensus-building has been laid by several recent initiatives to analyze and build on existing research to promote the needs of children in particular age groups. These initiatives have not attempted a com-

prehensive assessment of research and practice with respect to the role of parents. However, their conclusions have often included implications for parenting of children of specific age groups. For example, the major initiatives by the Carnegie Corporation of New York on early childhood (Carnegie Task Force 1994), middle childhood (Carnegie Task Force 1996), and early adolescence (Carnegie Council 1995), have all noted certain roles that are critical for parents to play in these age periods. The work of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Adolescent Development among Youth in High-Risk Settings has important implications for parenting (Furstenberg et al. forthcoming), as does the work of the MacArthur Research Network on Successful Pathways through Middle Childhood (*Research Network* 1996). In preparation for the "I Am Your Child" Campaign, the Families and Work Institute distilled a number of principles for parents and other caregivers of young children (birth to age three) based on an extensive literature review, the findings from the June 1996 conference on Brain Development in Young Children, and subsequent interviews (Shore 1997, pp. 26–27; see also "I Am Your Child" Campaign fulfillment materials). These initiatives, however, have looked only at a limited set of implications for parents, based on the perspective of a particular area of research and a particular age group of children.

Within the field of parenting education, a few efforts have been made to look more extensively at the parenting role, but always within a narrow group of practitioners. For example, in the early 1990s, four specialists, under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Extension Service, delineated core parenting skills that could provide a basis for planning parenting education programs within the Extension system (Smith et al. 1994). Some efforts have also been made to establish standards and best practices for parenting education and the related fields of family support and family life education (Cooke et al. 1996; Family Resource Coalition 1996; Bredehoft and Cassidy 1995; Dunst 1995). The Healthy Steps for Young Children Program, initiated by the Commonwealth Fund, promises, particularly in its evaluation phase, to contribute to our understanding of best professional practices; the Program has targeted a number of pediatric practices around the country for a special project to enhance their ability to provide mothers and fathers of young children (birth to age three) with information and support around early childhood development. Based on his survey of the field for the Pew Charitable Trusts, Nick Carter estimated that there is about a 75 percent overlap in the principles and assumptions that underlie the more than 50,000 parenting education programs around the country (Carter 1997), but the nature and content of this overlap have never been identified or examined.

In short, the ingredients exist for consensus-building about the parenting role, but they are, at this point, scattered, isolated from each other, embedded in specialized disciplines, and, with rare exceptions, relatively unknown to each other, to parents, and to practitioners who work with parents.

What is needed now is to consolidate, analyze, and extend these efforts, such that the latent consensus underlying them becomes both explicit and available. Such a breakthrough would give the knowledge base a much-needed credibility, coherence, and visibility, countering and clarifying the confusion and controversy that have hampered its ability to support parents and parenting education.

To accomplish this major step would require a carefully structured process of consensus-building. The centerpiece of such a process would need to be a leadership conference, one in which researchers and practitioners across disciplines and areas of interest affirmed their commonalities and clarified their differences face to face regarding the parenting role. For such a conference to meet its goals, however, a step-wise process of preparation would be essential, including a working paper and smaller task force meetings. Also essential would be consideration of possible follow-up conferences, as outlined below.

A fundamental component of the preparation phase of the leadership conference would be the creation of a working paper, to pull together existing knowledge and to provide a framework for the conference discussions. The paper would summarize and analyze previous efforts to identify parenting goals, tasks, practices, beliefs, skills, resources, and strategies about which there is widespread agreement regarding their importance in the parenting process. The paper would need to seek out ideas within research and practice across a broad spectrum of disciplines, American cultural groups, and philosophical approaches. It would also need to gather information both about the parenting role as a whole and about particular tasks and skills that arise with specific age groups—such as the perinatal period, early childhood, middle childhood, early adolescence and adolescence, and young adulthood—assessing and analyzing the commonalities and differences.

A second critical element in the preparation phase would be the creation of small task groups of leading researchers and practitioners to advise the working paper. These task groups would be organized by subject area, including, for example, groups addressing the parenting role at specific stages of child development. Meeting first separately and then together, these task groups would identify areas of agreement within and then across specialties, supplementing and refining the working paper's findings.

In other words, the working paper and the task group meetings would be integral parts of the consensus-building process, providing a foundation for the leadership conference. By means of the interviews and consultations for the paper, the task group meetings, and circulation of the working paper, all participants would come to the conference already having participated in earlier phases of consensus-building, and thus prepared for the task at hand: to validate the existence of key points of agreement with respect to what children need from parents across ages and within specific age groups, to refine and elaborate those points, to affirm the existence of diversity and disagreement and the reasons for them, and to identify key areas for further study.

Moving from broad principles to practical strategies, the leadership conference would then be expected to progress over the course of three to four days from overall goals for parenting, to a concrete set of the most important tasks for parents to undertake to meet these goals, to specific parenting strategies, to internal and external resources that parents need to accomplish their tasks, and, finally, to simple core messages that are most important to disseminate to parents. What are the fundamental things that children need from parents? What do parents need from society to provide them? What strategies are found to be widely effective? What are the most important messages that parents need to hear? Sessions at the conference should be allocated for considering the specialized parental demands and skills that arise at particular stages of children's development, with this knowledge both deriving from and contributing to the development of principles that transcend age groups. Attention should also be given to explicating differences and to highlighting areas in special need of further research and exploration.

In order for the conference to be successful in integrating knowledge and affirming areas of agreement, disagreement, and uncertainty, it would be critically important to include leaders in all phases of preparation and participation who represent several key kinds of diversity. First, it would be important to incorporate a diversity of disciplinary backgrounds, transcending the perspectives of individual fields and bridging the gaps among them to build a shared base of knowledge. Second, it would be important to include a broad range of racial and cultural perspectives, acknowledging and valuing the central role that they play in parenting. Third, it would be important to involve both parents and those who work with and on behalf of parents, to help ensure that the wisdom of parents' and practitioners' experience and the broad complexity of the parent's role were kept in mind throughout. These representatives could also point out ways in which the findings might be misinterpreted by parents, thus meeting a need that T. Berry Brazelton (1997) has stressed, to guard against promulgating knowledge that alarms or blames parents without justification. Fourth, it

would be important to include leaders in media, advertising, business, policy, and advocacy, in order to encourage a focus on reaching conclusions that would be of practical value to these sectors and others, thus also beginning the critically important process of dissemination, discussed further below.

An essential part of the evaluation process for the leadership conference would be an assessment of the need for follow-up conferences, both to supplement the findings of the original conference and to extend its impact. Topics on which follow-up conferences might be particularly important include: (1) separate, more in-depth consideration of parenting within particular ethnic groups and cultures in American society; (2) separate, more in-depth consideration of parenting at particular periods of child development; (3) separate, more in-depth consideration of the role of parenting in adult development; (4) evaluation of media campaigns that are conducted on behalf of parents, children, and families; and (5) implications of the original conference for parenting educators and other professionals who work with parents. In each of these arenas, again, groundwork has been laid, and a carefully planned, gradual progression of steps would be expected to produce significant and critically needed results.

Implement a comprehensive, integrated communications strategy to disseminate the emerging consensus about parenting in ongoing and targeted ways.

The consensus-building process described in the first recommendation would create a potentially powerful new resource for parents and for all those who work with and for parents. In fact, its very purpose would be to give new credibility, visibility, and clarity to existing knowledge on behalf of parents and families.

In order for these new insights to fulfill their potential, however, they would need to be made available and disseminated widely to parents, to parenting practitioners, and to those involved in relevant areas of the media, policy, advocacy, clergy, research, education, mental health, health care, and similar fields. It would be especially important to conduct outreach to those who do not seek the information on their own initiative.

In other words, the emerging consensus would demand a comprehensive communications strategy, one that taps both the power of the media and the power of consensus in order to reach parents and professionals with messages about the importance of parenting and of particular parenting strategies for supporting children and families.

Such a communications strategy would have several components. For professionals, a central component would be the publication in book form of the working paper emerging from the consensus process, revised and refined by the

conference discussions. Summaries should also be created that are adapted to particular segments of the professional audience, such as parenting educators, authors and journalists, scriptwriters, media executives, health care providers, mental health providers, community activists, and policy makers. Because parenting education is embedded in so many fields, the book and summaries should be publicized and circulated widely, by such means as presentations at professional meetings, leadership briefings, newsletter and journal articles and announcements, and a web site and linkages on the internet.

In addition, a major mass media campaign should be conducted to disseminate the key messages from the consensus-building process extensively and proactively to parents as well as those who work with parents. Like the consensus-building itself, a critical component of the communications campaign would be its preparation, including planning, research, design, and formative evaluation—using state-of-the-art techniques, for example, to identify goals for the campaign, messages, segments of the parenting audience, needs and preferences of these audiences, opportunities for collaboration, appropriate media, and effective strategies for working with these media. Ideally, a single, identifiable phrase would also be developed to lend coherence and visibility to each component.

While specific communication strategies would depend on the outcome of research and planning, a broad range of media would be expected to be tapped, including three categories: (1) news and feature reporting, both national and local; (2) advertising; and (3) entertainment programming. Within news and feature reporting, journalists, writers, editors, and other gatekeepers should be briefed about the compelling new information available from the consensus-building process, using approaches that are useful and effective for these professions, such as networking, special briefings, and packets that include sources for further information.

Within advertising, high-quality public service announcements and fulfillment materials could be funded and disseminated in a number of ways. For example, messages might be incorporated within existing campaigns, such as the major network campaigns currently underway. Alternatively, a campaign might be developed and supported by means of one or more corporate partnerships, creating a cause-related marketing initiative (see Moses 1994).

Within entertainment programming, the campaign would have a number of powerful options, in particular because entertainment media have thus far been largely overlooked as a vehicle for informing parents, because they have the potential to address some groups of harder-to-reach parents, and because they depict such a large number and variety of parenting behaviors. Previous experi-

ence suggests a number of effective strategies, such as special forums for scriptwriters; networking with writers, directors, and producers; and information packets offering ideas and resources. Such campaigns do not seek to change or compromise the overall mission of entertainment programming, but rather, within the context of entertainment, to encourage scriptwriters and entertainment decision-makers to incorporate situations in which characters model certain targeted healthy behaviors.

Formats to be targeted in entertainment programming should include not only prime-time situation comedies and dramas, but also daytime talk shows, soap operas, and television movies. Examples of behaviors that could be depicted, depending on the outcome of the consensus-building process, might include parents' getting a physical checkup for their child, playing with their child, surrounding children with appropriate toys and materials (most family sitcom settings are devoid of children's equipment, toys, and resources), teaching children skills, following through on limits, visiting their child's school, limiting television, seeking information on child development, or visiting a parenting group or family support center. As a more general example, entertainment executives might be encouraged to reduce the practice of using children, especially young children, as "props" and "background characters," who rarely need or get parental time, attention, nurturing, supervision, stimulation, or even responsiveness. The initiative would be strengthened by first analyzing existing research, and perhaps conducting further content analysis about current messages in the entertainment media regarding parenting.

While the entertainment media component of a campaign would focus primarily on specific behaviors, it is precisely in the area of how to translate the importance of child development into "day-to-day" actions that parents have many questions, according to the report of a survey of parents of children from birth to age three by the organization Zero to Three (1997a). "What they lack is not just information as to the importance of the earliest years, but also specific steps, ideas, activities, and concepts for making the most of this time" (Zero to Three 1997b, p. 4). Results from previous entertainment media campaigns, sometimes called "cooperative consultation," have been encouraging (Shefner and Rogers forthcoming; Glik et al. 1997; Steckler et al. 1995; Winsten 1994a,b; DeJong and Winsten 1990; Montgomery 1990, 1989; DeFoe and Breed 1988–89). For example, as a result of the Harvard Center for Health Communication's designated driver campaign, messages about designated drivers were incorporated in more than 160 prime-time episodes; within the first four years of the campaign, 55 percent of frequent drinkers told a Roper Poll that they had been taken home by a designated driver, contributing,

with other factors, to a 30 percent decline in annual alcohol-related traffic fatalities (Winsten 1997; Winsten 1994a).

All components of the communications strategy, including those involving news media, advertising, and entertainment media, would need to incorporate the wisdom of current experience and research about the techniques that enhance the effectiveness of communications efforts, such as careful planning, realistic goals, formative evaluation, knowledge of and respect for the target audiences, coordination with existing initiatives, and an integration of approaches addressed to individual behavior and policy agendas.

Certain considerations which apply to all communications strategies, however, would be particularly important in shaping this strategy for communicating parenting information. First, the strategy would need to involve, coordinate with, and form partnerships with the leading organizations and initiatives that are currently working on behalf of children, adolescents, parents, and families. These include: (1) foundations, advocacy groups, and other government and private organizations engaged in existing initiatives that target parents, children, and policy change regarding children's and family issues; (2) gatekeepers and organizations representing key media professionals; (3) professional societies involved in research; (4) professional organizations that represent those involved in service delivery to parents; (5) local media and public and private organizations that are in a position to generate community involvement; and (6) media and advocacy organizations and individuals specializing in understanding and representing the interests of particular racial and cultural groups within American society. The consensus-building conference and its preparation process would provide powerful initial steps in this coordination of efforts, but further outreach during the preparation phase of the communications campaign, including possibly a "think tank" meeting regarding the communications strategy itself, would be important additions (Backer 1997; see also Backer 1995b).

Second, the strategy would need to take into account the role of parents in the context of larger social and economic forces that affect parenting, distinguishing between problems that parents can change at home and those that parents and the rest of society need to change at the public policy level. Both can benefit from media attention. The strategy would need to be alert to the potential for a "backlash" effect, conducting research and working with the media to avoid presenting information in a way that raises parents' anxieties about issues that they cannot change or about which there is inadequate information.

Third, the strategy would need to be tailored to the diverse needs and information-seeking preferences of parents. A generalized, "one-size-fits-all" strategy

will fail to reach many parents, who must ultimately determine what information they need and want, as well as what sources they prefer and trust. Particular attention should be given to parents who are not effectively reached by current media efforts because of economic constraints, demographic factors, values, interests, and other considerations. As discussed earlier, parents will select information on the basis of the ages of their children, cultural values, particular problems—such as special needs, a sense of disempowerment, or a poor fit between child and parent temperament—and on the basis of particular concerns, such as the risks of drugs, poverty, or racism. Parents will select media according to educational background, the language in which they are fluent, the values of the culture with which they identify, age, timing, economic resources, and a number of other factors. Research on parents' needs, preferences, and attitudes might include focus groups and also consolidation of information from existing opinion research.

In this regard, parents of adolescents will deserve special attention, to address both the gap in media attention to teens and the prevalence of negative images of teens in current media. This recommendation does not suggest that the very important resources for parenting during the early and middle childhood years be reduced, but rather that they be supplemented. One might expect a number of urgent messages for parents of teens to emerge from the consensus conference, such as the importance of certain kinds of parent involvement in the teen years, the special developmental needs of adolescents, and the specialized skills that can help families to adapt to their teen's changing needs and to prevent teens from engaging in destructive behaviors in these high-risk years. Specific behaviors that could be modeled in entertainment programming might include attending school parent-teacher conferences and events (frequently shown in situation comedies for younger children but not for teens [Heintz et al. 1996]), teaching teens how to get a job and advocating for them in the marketplace, discussing such issues as media violence and drugs, setting curfews, getting information about adolescent development, and attending a group or class on parenting teenagers. Teenagers predominate among children in entertainment television, and they are much more likely than younger children to play primary roles (Heintz-Knowles 1995), creating a special opportunity for a campaign directed to the entertainment media regarding the parenting of adolescents.

Finally, efforts need to be made to ensure that the emerging information about parenting is gathered, consolidated, and accessible in an ongoing, permanent way. This objective requires the creation of a resource center on parents, parenting, and parenting education to monitor and pull together information and to make it available—by means of the internet, telephone, and other technologies—to parents, media, researchers, advocates, policy makers, and professionals

who work with parents from a broad range of disciplines, such as health care, mental health, and education. By so doing, the center would also encourage continued growth of knowledge; the linking of knowledge and practice; cooperation among researchers, practitioners, and the media; and the broader dissemination of knowledge. Furthermore, it would provide a mechanism for preserving the results and continuing the momentum generated by the special projects that are currently in progress and being proposed.

Development and administration of such a center should take place within an existing organization that offers a strong, ongoing, professional commitment to the full domain of parenting education. One option would be to develop the center in conjunction with the National Parenting Education Network (NPEN), a new professional organization that seeks to advance the field. NPEN is currently based in the offices of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, located at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; ERIC already provides a number of internet and other resources on parenting and parenting.

The center, like all aspects of the communications strategy, should coordinate with existing efforts, linking and supporting the hundreds of organizations, projects, programs, and offices in which parenting education research and resources are currently embedded, including research centers; professional organizations; media projects; major parenting education programs; advocacy groups; state and regional initiatives such as ParentLink in Missouri and the Center for Family Resources on Long Island; organizations with databases of expert sources for journalists such as the Media Resource Service in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, and the Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families at the University of Maryland; and other related resource centers, such as the National Fatherhood Initiative in Gaithersburg, Maryland, and the CIVITAS Initiative in Chicago.

Supplementing the informational efforts of the clearinghouse should also be further efforts, in collaboration with other organizations, to bring together media professionals and parenting professionals, training each in how to work effectively with the other. Also included should be efforts to provide or to catalyze continuing education for health care providers, parenting educators, and others, for whom the distance between research and practice needs to be bridged, and the rapid changes in the field made more available.

Such a resource center would, in other words, not only meet immediate informational needs but also stimulate initiatives to move the field more generally to a higher level of sophistication and accessibility. The goal ultimately would be

a network of resources, and means for evaluating those resources, within easy reach of all those who seek to support parents and families.

Individually and collectively, the consensus-building and its communications strategy would provide parents, professionals, and the larger society with an unprecedented new body of information about parenting, its importance, and its most critical elements. Together, they would catalyze and coordinate efforts to meet a need that is widely recognized, the need to affirm the existence and prevalence of consensus in a field characterized by controversy.

For researchers, the new initiatives would integrate existing research from across a variety of disciplines, acknowledge areas where knowledge has been established, highlight areas where further study is most urgently needed, and stimulate new developments in those areas.

For those who work directly with parents, the conference conclusions and their dissemination would add significantly to the coherence and accessibility of the knowledge base, contributing to a much-needed, stronger link between research and practice. The initiatives, in fact, would introduce many practitioners to the value of accessing the knowledge base, and to the insights it can offer for making program decisions and interacting with parents. They would also create a precedent for working at a meta-level that transcends disciplinary boundaries, a precedent that could be expected to catalyze an ongoing strengthening of the field.

For the media, the new initiatives would offer a major new resource, one whose influence would not at all lead to uniformity of coverage, but rather to added accessibility of the knowledge, a greater variety and quality of sources, and added sophistication in assessing, and helping parents to assess, the changing and conflicting advice that has plagued the history of parenting education in the media. Furthermore, the process would highlight the ways in which the media are best suited to contribute to the process of supporting parents, so that media efforts could be better designed to meet these goals, and it would allow for better informed prioritization of what messages to convey in media campaigns.

For parents, the new initiatives would offer, fundamentally, a greater clarity about the importance of the parenting role. They would also clarify what is well established about parenting, what is not established, and why. Thus, they would assist parents in prioritizing their tasks, in determining what can be considered "basics" within the parenting role, and in evaluating the myriad pieces of conflicting parenting advice that reach parents via media and interpersonal sources. They would also help parents in deciding what information they need,

potentially increasing their willingness and ability to access appropriate parenting education offerings both in the media and in the community. "Media literacy" for parents, in other words, would receive a significant boost.

In summary, the conference process and its communications strategy could contribute significantly to moving the field to a new level of understanding, while also advancing the coherence and clarity of the knowledge base in a way that would have a "ripple effect" in every arena that touches on the well-being of children, parents, and families. The potential for important social change is substantial and compelling.

Conclusion

With dramatic changes in the twentieth century both within the mass media and within families, the media have come to play an increasingly important role in providing information, advice, and support to parents.

A great deal has been accomplished. In some areas, such as publication of books and magazines, the media already have significant reach as resources for parents. In other areas, such as television and the internet, major new developments are underway.

This rapid growth brings both risks and opportunities, however. Our understanding is limited about the nature of the parenting messages both in informational and entertainment programming, as well as about their impact on parents and families.

Furthermore, the spectacular expansion has not been without gaps. In our demographically, socioeconomically, and culturally diverse population, some parents have not benefited from media efforts, either because they are not reached or because they prefer not to be. Furthermore, in response to a number of factors, some important kinds of information, such as about the parenting of adolescents, get less attention than others.

Most important, the media and their further development are handicapped by weaknesses in the accessibility and the coherence of the knowledge base about parenting. These weaknesses limit the media's usefulness both to parents and to professionals, contributing to an atmosphere of confusion, conflict, and triviality in media advice about parenting.

The greatest leverage, therefore, with respect to improving the potential of the media as a tool for supporting parents, is to take steps to build consensus and foster ongoing dissemination of knowledge about child development and parenting. The recommendations in this report, if implemented, would make major strides in doing so, as well as in assessing and supplementing the media's powerful influence on parents.

The time is right to take media initiatives in parenting education to a significantly higher level, one that influences underlying social and parental attitudes, reaches broader audiences, sets priorities around particular social needs, engages in more self-reflection and analysis, taps existing knowledge more extensively, and addresses consciously and effectively the critical needs of children, parents, and families.

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